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PLAYER

BY
MARY WEST

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A BORN PLAYER

BY

MARY WEST

AUTHOR OF "ALLEGRA"

New York
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AND LONDON

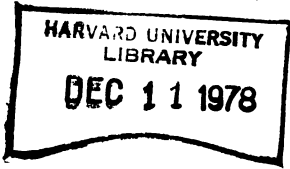
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CHAPTER I

A LAD IN SEARCH OF A VOCATION

IN volumes devoted to the glorification of English scenery you may possibly light on a scanty description or scratchy illustration of the village of Aldbourne, and of that reach of the River Ullen which Aldbourne boasts as its own ; or, crushing through the crowd at Burlington House, you may spy upon the heavily-laden walls pictures of the favoured village and its surroundings, in which pictures the Ullen always figures largely. Any such description or illustration, even the masterpieces at Burlington House, can, however, give you only a faint notion of the beauty of Aldbourne—much such a notion as the railway traveller gets of it, when his frantic train rushes madly screeching

through the Ullen valley, disturbing for a moment the peaceful loveliness. To realise the full charm of Aldbourne you should stay in it, or, still better, live in it, as did the actors in our story.

But in their days Aldbourne was far more beautiful than now. The high embankment which forms the railway, and cuts off the greater part of the village from view of the river and of the wooded hills beyond, was then hardly an embryo in the engineering brain, while the builder of the villa abominations which desecrate the river's sacred banks had not yet begun to construct houses of cards with his baby fingers. Indeed men were thinking more of pulling down than of building up; at least so said the Tories who gathered nightly in the pleasant parlour of the 'King's Head,' Aldbourne's best inn. It was the year after the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Bill, and that measure was still regarded by many good subjects as the first step towards national ruin, some of the inn's more vehement spirits affirming that the Great Duke had better have fallen

at Waterloo than have lived to sap the Constitution. Moreover, there began to be great talk of a Reform Bill, and the results of further meddling with the existing state of things were tremblingly foreboded.

Disturbing as these matters were to the village elders, they did not trouble the young folk of Aldbourne, and there might have been no such things as politics in the world, so far as cared a youth and maiden, who, one lovely afternoon towards the end of May, reposed on a high grassy slope at the edge of Thorndon Wood, with the Ullen flowing beneath them. The view from this height was pretty enough to have taken their attention, but they had seen it often, and the lad now chose to lie flat on his back, with the old year's winding-sheet of leaves for a couch, and to stare through the overhanging boughs of a beech-tree at the blue sky above; while the girl—a piece of cardboard in her hand and a paint-box beside her—copied, with more care than ability, a bluebell which she had found in a shady nook, loitering behind its fellows to enjoy the balmy air

of May. The pair looked about of an age, and you would not have guessed that age at more than nineteen years.

‘The beech and larch are trying which shall be the greener, and I really can’t say which wins,’ observed the lad dreamily in a musical voice, and with an accent free from the least touch of rusticity. ‘The larch is the more feathery, and the sky through its plumes looks almost green, while the beech is as distinct as lattice-work.’

‘I wish you would not be so lazy,’ said the girl, raising her head from her work, and showing a pale face set with small features, a face which would perhaps have been unattractive had not a pair of very soft brown eyes shed a pleasant light on it. She wore a gray gingham frock and a short-waisted black spencer. Her white straw bonnet she had hung on a hawthorn bush close by, because it interfered with her occupation; for at the date of our story a bonnet was by no means a ‘cockle or a walnut shell,’ but a thing of such goodly size that, in order to see the face of a woman with a

bonnet on, you must get quite in front of the wearer.

‘Please tell me if this bluebell is right,’ continued she in a gentle voice, but with a shade of provincialism in the accent. ‘It is so much harder to paint from a real live flower than from a picture of one.’

‘Of course,’ returned her companion with some scorn. ‘Everybody knows how easy it is to copy a copy. You see a dab here and a stroke there; you imitate them; and behold your picture! But the real thing in painting as in other arts is “to hold the mirror up to Nature.”’

‘I don’t know how to hold the mirror up to Nature,’ said the girl, sighing softly. ‘You must teach me. And, Matt, don’t you think that a rose would look nice with this bluebell, the rose I have done once or twice before?’

‘What? A garden rose — a July rose with a bluebell? Grace, Grace, do you call that holding the mirror up to Nature?’ Here the lad kicked out his legs by way of protest and overturned a paint-box and a sketch which lay beside him.

‘O Matt, pray get up and finish your picture,’ urged the busy maiden. ‘Perhaps you’ll not have another holiday afternoon like this, warm and clear and still.’

‘It is the lovely afternoon that makes me lazy. I want to do nothing but lie and listen to the birds. Hark! there is a nightingale gurgling a little, just to remind his brother warblers that he has not given up singing yet, and they needn’t be so pleased with themselves. Listen, what a chorus of thrushes! they have got the spring into their throats and no mistake; while the blackbirds keep in their mellow notes a remembrance of the winter.’

‘How wildly you have talked lately,’ said the girl, half reproving, half admiring. ‘I think mother would call it nonsense.’

‘I am like a big man I read about the other day, I find nonsense very refreshing,’ retorted her companion, and gesticulating skywards in rather theatrical fashion, he continued, ‘Ay, my sweet-throated knaves, I sympathise with you, for I remember the winter bitterly too — the cold schoolroom in

the day, the dismal little study in the evening, and nothing to break the monotony of either but caning a boy or going to a prayer-meeting. I could never bear the dreariness if it were not —'

'If it were not for what?' asked Grace, as he stopped suddenly.

'If it were not for you,' he answered, turning his head towards her and smiling lightly, while at the same time, with an odd tenderness, he smoothed his coat pocket.

A glow came over Grace's pale face, warming and beautifying it as the sunset flush warms and beautifies snow mountains. Matt looked at her admiringly, and was about to add further speech, when the sound of quick footsteps, crushing the beech leaves in the wood, checked his words.

'Who comes so out of season?' he muttered to himself.

The question was answered by the appearance of a short but portly man, of rubicund countenance, with the dress and bearing of a country squire. This personage, issuing suddenly from the thick shade of the wood,

nearly stumbled over the pair of legs which lay right across his path.

‘What business have you here?’ he demanded, pulling himself up, and speaking in the lofty tone not infrequently adopted by the landowner to the straying landless. ‘Are you aware that you are trespassing?’

The lad’s colour came, but he made no attempt to rise, and with as much haughtiness as his lowly position allowed, said—

‘If I am trespassing, so are you, for this wood belongs to the squire of Thorndon.’

‘You insolent fellow! Do you know who I am?’ cried the newcomer, his face growing redder and redder, his rather prominent eyes winking in quick wrath. You would have thought the reply to his magniloquent question would have been the Cloud-compeller himself.

‘Yes, I know you,’ answered Matt quietly. ‘You are the Rev. Dr. Beauchamp, rector of Aldbourne and landlord of Poppy Farm, but not of Thorndon Wood — that belongs to Mr. Poyntz.’

‘And you are the Dissenting minister’s

pupil, and are to be a schismatic preacher yourself, I hear; there is no doubt you have the necessary assurance for the character,' returned the other, with a keen glance at the prostrate lad. The face he contemplated must have exercised some mollifying influence over him, for he continued in a milder tone — 'Well, well, you never learned insolence from Mr. Unwin, who is as modest and retiring a man as I know.'

'Almost too much so, sir, is he not?' said the young man, leaping lightly to his feet. 'He should hand the surplus over to me.'

Could you have seen Matt, as he stood before the parson, you would have comprehended in a twinkling the latter's change of tone. Rather over middle height, well-proportioned, spare too — as youth should be — he was a pleasant sight to behold. Moreover, the figure was matched by as fair a face. His brown hair curled round a shapely head, his dark gray eyes shone now with fun, now with serious thought, and gave the effect of sunlight and shadow passing over the landscape on a bright June day. For the rest, if he

smiled, as he did now, you would not have stayed to catalogue either beauties or defects, but have recognised this as a face whose owner must of necessity be forgiven his sins unto seventy times seven.

‘Exactly so,’ returned the rector, in sharp staccato tones; ‘modesty is particularly becoming in young folks. You tell him from me that he is to teach you modesty as well as Latin. I hear he is a good Latinist. Ah, what a pity! what a pity that he isn’t in the Church — a man like that, a scholar and a —’

‘A gentleman, you would say, sir,’ interposed Matt eagerly, as Dr. Beauchamp hesitated to pronounce a word which would set the son of a village apothecary on a level with parsons and squires. A certain Austrian magnifico declared humanity to begin with the barons; the English squirearchy of fifty years ago believed gentleness to begin with themselves.

‘Well, well, he is a scholar and a good man,’ said Dr. Beauchamp, avoiding acquiescence in Matt’s assertion, ‘but mistaken in his choice of a calling, and still more mistaken

in being the first to bring schism into a peaceful parish.'

Alarmed both at the rector's attack and Matt's bold defence, the girl had not until now proffered a word. This aspersion, however, on a man so nearly related to her as was the minister, made her forget the silence in which, as befitted her sex, she was accustomed to hear arguments theological, political, or social.

'My father did not bring the division,' she said, modestly but firmly; 'the chapel was built and the congregation formed before he was offered the pastorate, and if he had not accepted it, some one else would have done so.'

'No doubt, no doubt,' responded Dr. Beauchamp testily; 'but that doesn't alter the fact. He was my first opponent here.'

'Opponent! O no, sir! you are both preachers of the Gospel.'

'Well done, Grace!' ejaculated Matt under his breath, and with a comical twinkle of his eyes. The speech could indeed sound nothing but ironical to ears used to the philippics of certain blatant theologians of the parish, who

were quick to pronounce Dr. Beauchamp as ignorant of the Gospel as any South Sea islander.

‘Gospel, Gospel!’ echoed the parson. ‘From what I can understand, each sectary has a Gospel of his own. There seem to be as many Gospels as meeting-houses. But naturally the daughter thinks her father in the right.’ Here the speaker broke off, and scrutinised Grace as he had scrutinised Matt. He had, of course, occasionally met the minister’s daughter in the village, but he had never bestowed any especial attention on her. What he saw now evidently pleased him, for he went on—‘Well, well, if you are as good as you look, you are very good; but you must not pretend to argue on religious matters. Girls have got plenty to do to think about their bonnets and their sweethearts.’ Saying this, he gave a quick glance at Matt, who responded by a gay smile, while Grace blushed rosy red, and looked so pretty in her maiden shame as quite to win the rector’s heart.

‘Ay, ay, and painting is a nice employment too. Come, let us see your picture.

Bluebells, eh? Very well done indeed,' he said, as Grace reluctantly showed her flower-piece. 'Nice girl's work, much better for them than religious argument. And you, young man; have you been doing nothing but lie on dry beech leaves with fresh ones for a roof? Ah, the beech is the most hospitable of trees. "*Sylva domus, cubilia frondes.*" Do you know that?'

'I know what it means,' said Matt smiling, 'but I don't know the author.'

'What? what? not know Juvenal, and Mr. Unwin such a scholar!'

'Juvenal is not included in the Nonconforming minister's course,' said Matt drily. 'I suppose he is not considered improving.'

'Absurd squeamishness! All the classics are improving,' returned the rector, with happy impartiality.

To tell the truth, Dr. Beauchamp's remembrance of classic authors was bedimmed by time. He had never been a great student, and of his university days he retained little save that intangible something, which is not scholarship, but, as it were, the aroma thereof,

and which Alma Mater alone can bestow. This, like the scent of the rose, survives long years, and it survived with the rector, but it did not prompt his tribute to the beech-tree; he had found that in a book which served him as a *vade mecum* and was dear to him — perhaps dearer than the Prayer-book — Evelyn's *Sylva*. For Dr. Beauchamp was learned in forestry, and as great an authority on the cultivation of trees as any man in the kingdom.

Matt did not care to pursue the question of classic authors, but picking up his sketch he presented it to the rector.

‘If you will look at this, sir,’ he said, ‘you will see that I have not been altogether idle.’

‘Why, what have we here?’ cried Dr. Beauchamp. ‘The view before us, I declare; the river, the hills, the trees. Excellently done. You are quite an artist. Come now, hadn’t you better give up the idea of preaching and take to painting?’

‘I have no vocation for either,’ returned Matt quickly, his eyes resting with great eagerness on the parson’s self-satisfied countenance. Probably he did not there find what

he sought, for he continued lightly, 'I was looking for my vocation when you discovered me lying under the trees. So please, sir, another time when you come upon a harmless lad and lass, do not ask them what business they have either upon your own or any other gentleman's property. One may be pursuing art in a strictly feminine fashion, and the other looking out for a vocation.'

'You have a fine glib tongue of your own,' began Dr. Beauchamp in returning wrath, but the bright countenance before him was irresistible, and with a short laugh he went on — 'Well, well, whatever calling you hit on, you'll have plenty of face to carry it through. Good-day, good-day;' and so saying he went off at a sharp trot down the slope, carrying both his stout person and his sixty years with ease.

Matt stood looking after him until he disappeared, then puffing out his cheeks, and, as it seemed, his whole body, with a perfect imitation of the parson's voice and style he repeated that gentleman's greeting —

'What business have you here? Do you know that you are trespassing?'

In spite of her belief that mimicry was wrong, Grace laughed a little, but quickly composing her face she went on with her work, while Matt, throwing himself again upon the ground, continued in his own natural manner —

‘These petty tyrants of the fields are enough to make us all revolutionists. What right have they to monopolise the earth so? One would think by the airs they give themselves that they expected to carry away their land with them when they die. Nobody must pick wild flowers, listen to wild birds, or look at views on the property of a village squire. I have read in an ancient volume that “the earth is the Lord’s.” The assertion isn’t true here anyhow. The earth belongs to Squire Poyntz, Squire Carew, and Dr. Beauchamp.’

‘Matt, how you talk!’ said Grace rather shocked; ‘and how you answered Dr. Beauchamp! I hope he won’t complain to father.’

‘He wouldn’t dream of such a thing,’ returned Matt confidently. ‘He is peppery, but not ill-natured. I wonder how he came by his degree. It must be a precious easy thing to become a Doctor of Divinity. He

knows as much of theology as I do about planting trees, and you may be sure that bit of Latin has stuck to him because it is in praise of the beech; but as to reading, I believe he would find it hard now to construe either Virgil or Augustine.'

'Matt,' ventured Grace timidly, not troubling herself about the parson's scholarship; 'what did you mean by saying the ministry was not your vocation?'

'Do you think it is my vocation?'

'I hope so — I hope so; you could do such good service in the cause.'

'You are a dear little Puritan, and would look sweetly in the proper frock and hood.'

'But, Matt,' persisted Grace, not to be turned from the great subject even by pleasant words, 'you will not grieve us by relinquishing the ministry.'

'Suppose for a moment that I have no call.'

'Perhaps the call will come if you wait and pray,' said Grace reverently. 'And you are so clever, and speak so well. You would preach so beautifully.'

‘Preach! I daresay I could. If it were only preaching I shouldn’t hesitate a minute. Indeed, to get up and tell your meddling ignorant congregation your real opinion of them would be fine. How I should enjoy having a turn at the Aldbourne folks, especially at the deacons! But then there would be a certain old gentleman to pay. After delivering my soul, what humble pie I should have to eat! How I must declare to Deacon Masters that I did not reflect on him—he is another Paul in his boldness to rebuke error; and to Deacon Penny that I had no thought of him—he is to be compared to John the Evangelist in mildness. O dear! the clergy of the Establishment are to be envied; they can tell their congregations the most unpleasant truths without fear of consequences. Such a course with us would mean starvation.’

‘I never heard you talk so wildly as you do to-day; it is a good thing father cannot hear you,’ said Grace, rising from the ground; and possibly reminded of the impending meal by Matt’s solemn closing word, she proceeded—
‘We must really start for home, or we shall

keep tea waiting. I heard the church clock strike four long ago.'

At Grace's reminder Matt rose also; not that he felt the healthy vacuum within which generally answered to the thought of food, but meals in the minister's house were not movable feasts; they must be partaken of at a certain hour, nor would any member of the household dream of absence from them without serious cause. Lading himself, therefore, with the sketching materials, and taking Grace's hand, Matt ran with her down the slope into the hollow beneath, and then out into the high road, which at this point divides the Ullen from Archer's Hill. The hill is a bold chalk ridge clothed with grass, its side set here and there with wild Guelder-rose, bramble, yew, and juniper.

Our pair climbed the steep ascent, and pursued their way to the village. But on the height, perhaps influenced either by the sky above or the view below, Matt showed a disposition to loiter.

'Come and sit in the devil's arm-chair,' he urged, trying to tempt Grace a few steps

down the hillside to where, in the fork of an ancient yew, was a comfortable seat with a pretty good semblance of back and arms.

But Grace was intent on household thoughts, and would not be beguiled.

‘Well, if you will not stay, I shall,’ said Matt. ‘Tea will not be ready yet, so I shall just sit and look at the view till the church clock strikes five. I can get home in two minutes.’

‘Don’t be late, then, or mother will be vexed,’ said Grace, as she went away.

Matt, left alone, did not climb the devil’s arm-chair, but flung himself at full length on the downy grass, crushing a fine bed of wild thyme—which, though not yet in bloom, sent up a sweet smell—and turned his back on the view he had lingered to enjoy. And yet from hence it was charming indeed. The small part of Aldbourne that could be seen consisted of an old house at the hill’s foot, a few quaint cottages, and a low thatched inn, while over the shoulder of the hill peeped a red-brick church tower. The river-side inn, which bore and bears the name of ‘The

Cygnets,' was then, as it is now, a great resort of anglers on the Ullen, but was not then, as it is now, a place of small craft, since at the period of our story the delights of boating were untasted by the general world.

The Ullen flowed to-day in imperceptible motion until it reached the weir which closes it in between Aldbourne and the opposite village of Thorpe, when it fell over the bar with a dreamy sound. Upon it the sunlight lay, broad and dazzling, save where the bordering trees cast a shade. These were clad in their freshest foliage; the chestnuts, too, were set all over with silver cones, while the hawthorns, bowed down by the weight of snowy flowers, dipped their branches in the stream. Among the trees on the Thorpe side of the river the little spire of a church pointed heavenwards, and above it rose hills, here wooded, here covered with short grass, or partly cultivated, all seeming to shut in the happy valley from the perturbations of a tumultuous world. Even the life and freshness of spring hardly came with any rousing power into this home of repose — this Sleepy Hollow.

But youth is often independent of its surroundings, and Matt's heart was now beating in warm eager pulsations as, with his face close to the wild thyme, he read from a pamphlet that he had taken out of his coat pocket. Had an intruder peeped over his shoulder, he would have discovered that the book contained neither the harmonious verse of Virgil nor the heart-cry of St. Augustine, of which the lad had just discoursed so readily, but with some surprise he would have perceived this title, '*Venice Preserved*, a Tragedy, by Thomas Otway'; and with yet more surprise would have beheld, spread out on the turf, a bill whereon was declared in stately language that Mr. Edmund Kean and company would, on the morrow and two following nights, perform in the Theatre Royal in the county town of Dulford these plays: *The Man of the World*, *Venice Preserved*, and *King Lear*.

CHAPTER II

THE MINISTER AT HOME

THE house to which Grace Unwin directed her steps stood in the village street and near the river. From its windows could be seen the rush of water over the weir and the bridge connecting Aldbourne with Thorpe. It was an old substantial house of red brick, in past days the residence of the doctor, and appeared a better dwelling than you would have supposed to be within the means of a village Nonconformist minister. But the Rev. William Unwin kept a school, and thus eked out the income derived from his chapel — an income always narrow, and occasionally shrinking in a very perplexing way.

A simple iron railing closing in a little garden space, set with two variegated hollies and two bays, separated the house from the

village street. The house door stood invitingly open; and well might the minister's door present no barrier to any comer, since the riches within were not material, but mental and moral, and little likely to attract the thief.

Passing through a rather dark hall paved with brick, Grace entered the family sitting-room, which was at the back of the house, with windows opening upon the large and ill-kept garden. The room bespoke poverty; the table stood on rickety legs, the stuffing peeped through the chair-covers, the carpet and curtains were threadbare, and now, as the western sun streamed on them, they looked shabbier than ever. A bookcase full of volumes testified to the minister's love of literature; his favourite books, however, were not here, but in his sanctum over the schoolroom. This latter had, in the doctor's time, been a surgery, the study a consulting-room, and grim tales were afloat among the boys of a cupboard in the upper chamber wherein Mr. Unwin, upon taking possession, had discovered a veritable skeleton, grinning with frightful complacency.

The ghastly grin was still to be seen, they said, flitting up and down the narrow stairs which led from the schoolroom lobby to the study. Hence in the early darkness of winter there was much huddling together of bristling heads, and when the hour of freedom came much scampering of nailed boots, signs of alarm not to be wondered at, since the allowance of candles in the minister's household was small.

‘Am I late?’ asked Grace, seeing the tea on the table, while her mother — ever quick to employ spare moments — busily mended a stocking.

‘Well, it isn't five yet,’ allowed Mrs. Unwin, in a thin toneless voice; ‘but I've been fidgeting in case your father should come in and want his tea. You shouldn't drive the time so near.’

Grace did not answer; she seldom replied to her mother's fault-finding; but having first gone into the kitchen and ascertained that the kettle was boiling — a point always in dispute between Mrs. Unwin and the maid, Kezia — she got her thimble and began to help her

mother. Darning, however, is an employment that leaves the thoughts pretty free, and Grace, sitting close to the open window through which a tender breeze wafted the scent of fast-fading wallflower, was divided between wonder at Matt's strange talk this afternoon, and anxiety lest he should linger on the hill long enough to provoke a scolding. That any member of her family should be late for a meal seemed to Mrs. Unwin as cruel an offence as to a cabinet-minister it would appear were a partisan late for a division ; and reasonably, since the daily meals were to her as important as political measures to a statesman, having to be planned with as much foresight and a good deal more economy than the Budget itself.

Fortunately the minister and his wife had not a large family. Three daughters composed it, and two of these were married — Martha to a minister who served a chapel in the north of England, and Rachel to a farmer on the other side of Dulford, known among his neighbours as a well-to-do but close-fisted man.

Mrs. Unwin was small and thin, with a

face intended by Nature to be pleasing, but spoiled by the absence of flesh and the presence of care. It had the harassed expression often to be seen on the countenances of women who are always bent on making two ends meet which obstinately refuse contact. The necessity of pruning here and snipping there, the never having a shilling to spend cheerfully, must, one would think, crush even high spirits, and Mrs. Unwin's had never been high. If her economies had issued in an easier state of things, there would have been some satisfaction in them, but their only result was to keep the wolf from the door. Mr. Unwin, like many a Nonconformist minister, had to prove the full bitterness that the voluntary system can inflict upon him who lives by it; but nothing in his experience of it hurt him and his family so much as the dilatoriness of the seat-holders with their payments. He would rise in chapel to give notice, as, alas! he was often compelled to do, that the pew-rents were long overdue, his beautiful mild face troubled and almost indignant, while Mrs. Unwin felt herself on the verge of tears, Grace flushed with shame,

and Matt gnashed his teeth in impotent wrath.

Had Mrs. Unwin taken any pleasure, it would most certainly have been sadly; but pleasure was not for her. Matters of the house engrossed her. She never went for a walk except to chapel, nor read a book except on Sundays, when she nodded over a volume of Whitefield's sermons. For she had been bred a Calvinist, and took her religion sadly. To see her at chapel, with her usually mournful expression intensified, no one would have supposed that she considered the place a little heaven below, and pictured the Heaven above as Aldbourne chapel enlarged and eternal.

Grace had hardly plodded through a single hole of her stocking when she heard a rapid footstep and a gay whistle coming round the side of the house, and Matt, his hands in his pockets, his cap at the back of his head, passed the parlour window.

'I really think that Matt should give up whistling,' said Mrs. Unwin plaintively; 'it doesn't seem consistent in a candidate for the ministry.'

‘Father is always glad to hear him whistle,’ retorted Grace, quite sharply. ‘He says he loves to have young folks cheerful.’

Grace was saved further defence of Matt by the lad’s entrance, and as she glanced up at him she could not but be struck by the contrast he presented to the typical Nonconformist preacher.

‘What! isn’t tea ready?’ he asked. ‘I am dying of hunger.’

‘That is a most wild way of talking,’ remonstrated Mrs. Unwin feebly. ‘Dying of hunger! when you had a good dinner at one o’clock.’

‘It is metaphorical, I know,’ returned Matt lightly; ‘but then, for a preacher, metaphor is everything. Don’t you remember the sensation little Daw made with his metaphors? Mr. Unwin’s sermons fell quite flat afterwards. And yet Daw talked nothing but twaddle.’

‘I don’t like to hear you make fun of ministers,’ protested Mrs. Unwin. ‘It isn’t right.’

‘Why not? Ministers are men, and often

very ridiculous men. How are you to help laughing at them ?'

'But their sacred office —'

'Renders them more ridiculous,' interrupted Matt boldly. Somehow Mrs. Unwin's arguments always roused him to contradiction. 'I never saw anything so absurd as little Daw, with his vanities and his affectations; while his sermons were like

A tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing !

The quotation was out of Matt's mouth before he could stop it. He looked furtively at his hearers and went on quickly —

'Then that Wesleyan who strayed here the other day, and argued so condescendingly with Mr. Unwin, trying to show how wrong we Independents are in our views. Yet the ignorant creature had never heard of Augustine, nor read a word of Calvin; and as to comprehending the strong logical position of the Calvinists, he didn't understand the very first principles of reasoning — wasn't *he* ridiculous?'

'Even father said that he was too wise in

his own conceit,' observed Grace gently. 'But we mustn't judge all from a few.'

'And you, Grace, and you, ma'am, mustn't judge all from one. You have lived so many years with Mr. Unwin that you suppose other ministers to be like him. I tell you they are no more like him than —'

Here the door opened, and Matt's simile was cut short by the entrance of its subject.

The minister was a spare man, and, but for a slight stoop, would have been over middle height. He had steady gray eyes, a broad forehead, and snowy hair. His face was that of a scholar, refined and thoughtful, and though not handsome as to feature, was exalted into beauty by its expression. This the casual observer called mild and gentle, but he who saw farther beheld in it a verification of these ancient words: 'The work of righteousness shall be peace.'

Dr. Beauchamp has already proclaimed Mr. Unwin a scholar, and Matt has declared him a gentleman. He was both these, and he was something more.

We who judge by present facts are apt to

associate Nonconformity with noisy politics, with a jealous watchfulness of the National Church, with a constant readiness for attack ; and, knowing that minds perturbed by such emotions cannot be serene enough for the growth of the gentler graces, we suppose there to be some natural antagonism between Dissent and saintliness. The Church of Rome has, beyond all doubt, produced the greatest saints — men and women who combined in a quite unique way loftiness of aim with simplicity of life and sweetness of manners, who, while their feet touched earth, had their conversation in Heaven. The Church of England can show her saints too, and at any rate in past days there sprang out of the ungenial soil of Nonconformity itself a few men who exhibited that exquisite blending of the human and divine which makes the saint. Such men are not to be read of as partisans at public meetings, nor are they lengthily recorded in year-books ; yet they existed, and of them the minister of Aldbourne was one.

‘I am afraid you have waited for me,’ he said, as he came into the parlour. ‘Now that’s

a pity — and this lad with his fine appetite too.'

'You have been hindered, I suppose?' said Mrs. Unwin questioningly.

'Yes; I was called to a sick person. I will tell you presently,' he answered, and lifting his hand he blessed the food.

Matt dashed into the bread and butter with seeming gusto; his appetite was, however, soon satisfied, while the minister evidently did not care to eat, and Grace, at once apprehending that his abstraction was due to deep feeling, and afraid lest her mother should ask him questions, began to talk about her afternoon's employment.

'We have had a beautiful walk, father,' she said, 'and have done some painting.'

'Good children,' responded the minister, patting her arm. 'Painting is delightful work for a holiday afternoon.'

'And while we were so agreeably occupied,' said Matt, 'who should appear on the scene but Dr. Beauchamp, very angry with us for "trespassing," as he called it, though why he should feel it his prov-

ince to guard Thorndon Wood I can't understand.'

'I hope you were respectful, Matt,' said the minister, with some anxiety. 'You are so soon ablaze, I know; and I would not have anything happen to break my peaceful relations with the rector.'

'We were both rather hot at first,' allowed Matt, 'but we soon cooled down, and I assure you, sir, we were quite good friends before we parted.'

'Yes, father,' said Grace, 'he was very amiable, and talked pleasantly to both of us.'

'That is well,' said the minister, much relieved. 'Dr. Beauchamp has behaved with great forbearance towards me ever since my coming here, showing no displeasure when I have visited his people, nor withdrawing his material help from them. Leaving, therefore, those things whereon we are not called upon to pass judgment, we may truly speak of him as a generous and a kindly man.'

'So polite to ladies, too,' said Mrs. Unwin; 'and he a bachelor. I do wonder why he has

never got married. He must be very dull all alone in that big house, poor man.'

'He seems a good deal more lively than most married men,' asserted Matt; 'and, as Grace says, he talked away to us ever so. He praised her flowers and my sketch, and even advised me to follow painting as a profession.'

'As a profession!' said Mr. Unwin. 'Well, I really think you like painting better than Greek.'

'But he must study, or he won't have room to laugh at "ignorant creatures," as he calls Mr. Daw and Mr. Barry,' said Mrs. Unwin, with the air of putting to rights that always exasperated Matt, though in the minister's presence he rarely let his vexation appear.

Mr. Unwin looked pained, but a glance at Matt's face softened his reproof, so that it sounded almost like commendation.

'Why, Matt, my lad, who would think you had been brought up a Calvinist, when you seem to expect the Wesleyan doctrine of perfection to be illustrated in the persons of its

ministers. Now Mr. Barry is a good man, and has worked with much zeal among the poorer members of his connection ; if then his scholarship be small, and his arguments flimsy, we must remember that the itinerant minister has little chance either of reading or thinking deeply. He who enjoys his books in a quiet sanctum, and, in the pleasant monotony so helpful to meditation, perpendes great truths, should not be hard on him who is always jogging hither and thither, now on a sorry steed, now on his own aching legs, through fresh scenes and in all weathers. Indeed, when I consider how much both of study and thought must be given to the preparation of a single sermon, I am filled with wonder that these ever-travelling ministers can preach at all.'

'That's true, sir,' assented Matt, 'and I would have remembered it, but Mr. Barry would not suffer me. He talked as if not only were all hidden things clear to him, but as if he could make them clear to us also, were we not such miserable dunderheads. Now this assumption in a man who does not always

discriminate between the nominative and accusative cases is too much.'

'The people to whom Mr. Barry preaches are untroubled by his confusion of cases,' said the minister. 'Indeed, his hearers probably listen to him with all the greater profit because his speech resembles their own. They are of the same opinion as the carpenter here, who, when I asked him why he left us and went to the Primitive Methodist meeting, replied, "Waal, tain't what ye says, but the way ye says it, as I can't do wi'. I loikes a preacher as doan't talk no foiner than me." So you perceive how these "brown-bread preachers," as good old John Wesley called them, are acceptable to some tastes. With regard to Mr. Barry's love of argument, he overrates his own powers therein, but many a theologian does that.'

'Not you, sir; you are more likely to overrate anybody's powers than your own. Isn't he, ma'am?' cried Matt, turning to Mrs. Unwin, sure of sympathy here. 'He even lets Deacon Masters argue with him when he could crush him in a moment.'

‘I do not feel at all sure of that,’ returned Mr. Unwin, with a broad smile. ‘The worthy deacon never strikes me as a man to be easily crushed. He is a true Briton; he doesn’t know when he is beaten.’

‘He is too self-satisfied and too ignorant to know,’ Matt blurted out hastily.

‘Matt, Matt!’ cried the minister, ‘it grieves me to hear you dwell on the faults of our brethren. I really think I must have displayed on this table the distich which the great Augustine had engraven on his —

Quisquis amat dictis absentum rodere vitam
Hanc mensam vetitam noverit esse sibi.’

‘I should never think of the deacon’s faults if he would let mine alone,’ murmured Matt; and Grace, wondering at his unwonted spleen, changed the subject.

‘Who was it sent for you, father?’ she asked. ‘Was it Mrs. Brook?’

‘Yes, my dear; the child Anna was worse, they said. But when I got to the cottage I thought her to be looking much the same as yesterday. She was lying with her face

turned to the open casement, gazing at the pink blossoms of the late-flowering apple-tree, upon which the sun shone brightly. She had all along counted on seeing it bloom before she died, and now she looked at it smiling. When I entered she glanced at me, and stretched out her shadowy hand. As she stirred, her mother drew near with some wine sent from the rectory, but she turned from it, and, still looking at me, she whispered, "Read." I read the twenty-third Psalm, and could but think that to Anna the "valley of the shadow of death" seemed even as a "green pasture." After the Psalm I spoke a few words. While I spoke a certain drowsiness fell on her, and when I had ended she murmured, "Now I'll say my prayers; it's time to sleep." I listened intently, and heard her repeat in a faint fluttering voice the Lord's Prayer, and then the Apostles' Creed. At the words, "the Life everlasting," her eyes closed, her head sank a little. We thought she had gone to sleep, and so she had — into the sleep of death.'

As the minister told his story he, like the dying girl, gazed at the fair tokens of spring

without, perhaps seeing in them types of things in the heavens. The invisible world was very near him, the passing of a soul thereto might well seem only the going from one room to another. But to his young listeners the thought of death was gloomy indeed; it clouded the brightness of the day; even over Matt's face there crept a shadow, while tears rose to Grace's eyes.

'Ah!' she murmured, 'and Anna was only eighteen — younger than either Matt or I.'

'Well, it's a good thing for her, poor soul, that her mother took to coming to chapel, or she wouldn't have had much spiritual comfort,' said Mrs. Unwin. Then with a puzzled expression she continued — 'Anna was a good Christian, I do believe, but I don't see how she could call the Apostles' Creed a prayer.'

'It sounded like one,' returned her husband, rising as she struck the jarring note, and betaking himself to his study.

You are perhaps surprised, dear reader, to find a man like the Rev. William Unwin with so unsympathetic a spouse; but, if you look around, you will see that pious people marry

much in the same way as worldly ones, requiring fitness in fortune, position, age, religious belief, and disregarding altogether the oneness of mind and purpose that alone can make the double life move without friction. Yet you will hardly wish things to be other than they are when you consider what advantages the incongruous marriages of good and great men, from Socrates downwards, have wrought the world at large. For the soul, finding no understanding of itself in its other half, turns to the great soul of humanity, sure of comprehension there. A happy marriage, Burbage declared, had ruined Charles Wesley as an apostle, and wedlock would have done the like for John Wesley and George Whitefield if God had not sent them 'a brace of ferrets.' This digression seems forced on us, in order that we may comprehend how Mr. Unwin's marriage might be, by its very unsatisfactoriness, a means of grace to his flock.

CHAPTER III

MATT EVADES A PRAYER-MEETING

THOUGH our story finds Matthew Hare in the bosom of a Dissenting minister's family, yet his father had been a clergyman of the Church. This pious and honest soul, falling under the influence of the Evangelical revival, saw cause to doubt the lawfulness of an Established Church; he consequently resigned his benefice and joined the Independent body. The change of opinion befell him when his only child, whose birth had cost the mother her life, was but eight years old. The lad had therefore grown up in Nonconformity, and moreover with the prospect before him of becoming a preacher, since the father fondly believed that his son's early readiness in speech predestined him to be a second Whitefield. But death took Mr. Hare before his hopes could be

realised, and Matt was left to the care of another. That other was the minister of Aldbourne, whom Mr. Hare appointed Matt's sole guardian, charging him to bring up the boy as the young Timothy was brought up — 'in earnest application to reading, exhortation, and teaching.'

Yet, though educated in all the straitness of the new Puritanism, the parson's son had kept, as we have seen, a decided freedom both of opinion and expression, towards which three things contributed about equally — the exuberance of life within him, the scholarship acquired from Mr. Unwin, and the occasional visits he paid to his mother's relations, who were by no means rigid religionists.

During the greater part of Matt's life in the minister's family other youths had kept him company, but just now he was the sole boarder there, though day-scholars were still numerous. The tradesmen were of course glad to send their sons to a school where the teaching was good and the charge for it small, and even the farmers, albeit for the most part Churchmen, men of substance, and much above

associating with tradespeople, found the attraction of learning and low terms close at hand overcome whatever qualms they might have with regard to Dissent. There were, indeed, old-fashioned farmers who hated Methodism as they hated Popery, and who sternly reprehended the laxity of such neighbours as entrusted their children's education to a Non-conformist. These, however, were few, and their strictures were met by certain unanswerable arguments. Mr. Unwin always voted on the Tory side, and always spoke respectfully of the Church and clergy; indeed, there were not wanting people who said that he would have been a Church clergyman himself, only he could not stomach the king's supremacy. To some of the farmers' wives this squeamishness did not appear altogether surprising, since, like the sex in general, quick to reduce any argument *ad hominem*, they for their parts could not wonder at anybody questioning that article of the faith, when such a man as the present king was head of the Church.

To the sons, therefore, of both farmers and

tradesmen Matt taught the beginnings of knowledge, and a very wearisome task he often found it, but it had never seemed so intolerable as on the afternoon following that of the sketching expedition. Mr. Unwin sat at his desk hearing a boy stumble through some phrases of the *Delectus*, while Matt himself drooped over a row of boys who were laboriously writing 'Knowledge is Power.'

'You are never likely to prove your text,' he said, rapping a set of refractory knuckles; '“ Ignorance is Bliss ” should be your theme.'

The owner of the knuckles began a loud whimper, causing Mr. Unwin to look up with a troubled expression. This was the fifth boy who had wept under Matt's rule to-day.

'You are not well, my lad,' said the good man kindly, and in truth Matt's bright face had strangely altered since yesterday—his red cheeks had paled into a yellowish whiteness, and there were dark circles round his eyes. 'You are not well,' repeated Mr. Unwin; 'you had better dismiss your boys; it is only half an hour before time. And then you can stroll out and get a little fresh air.'

‘Thank you, sir,’ responded Matt languidly; ‘but I think I’ll go and lie down.’

‘Perhaps that will be the best thing to do,’ said Mr. Unwin, and turned his attention again to the struggling Latinist.

With a shout and a whoop the liberated boys dashed out at the side gate, some making their way to the river to paddle in its shallows or to swim in its quiet pools; others starting up Aldbourne Hill in search of birds’ nests; while one or two less enterprising youngsters dawdled out the remainder of the afternoon at the street corner with a group of village loiterers, who, under the uncertain English sky, were content, as those loiterers of old under the Syrian blue, to ‘stand all the day idle.’

Matt followed his pupils into the lobby, and then stole cautiously upstairs. From the stair window he saw Grace in the garden gathering may, and hugging himself on having avoided her watchful eyes and ears, he hurried to his own room. It seemed as if he were like those animals who, at the touch of illness, love to retire from their kind.

‘How is Matt now?’ asked Mr. Unwin, when an hour or so later he entered the parlour where his wife and daughter awaited the coming of their men-folk to tea.

‘Matt! Is he ill?’ cried Grace, her tender face blanching beyond its usual whiteness.

‘He has a sick headache, I think. He looked so unwell in school that I sent his class away, and he went to lie down.’

‘I shouldn’t wonder if he’s got a touch of colic. I saw him eating green gooseberries this morning,’ said Mrs. Unwin plaintively. ‘He is as much a child as the youngest boy in the school, and really, now he’s studying for the ministry, he ought to put away childish things.’

‘I am afraid he was not altogether well before the gooseberries,’ said Mr. Unwin, ignoring the latter part of his wife’s speech.

‘Pour out tea, Grace, while I run up and see how he is,’ said the good woman, who, however ready to denounce foolish acts, was equally ready to wait on the suffering perpetrators of these.

‘Is he better?’ asked Grace, when Mrs.

Unwin, after a short stay above, returned to the parlour.

‘He says he’s better, but he looks ill enough. He has tied a wet towel round his head, and is lying down. He won’t have anything either to eat or drink, but says a good sleep will set him right; and I shouldn’t wonder if it did — there’s nothing like sleep and fasting for a sick headache. Still, it does seem a pity he should miss the prayer-meeting.’

Mrs. Unwin would, in fact, have been the first to forbid Matt’s attendance at chapel now he was sick, but she could never help lamenting untoward necessities.

‘He is not fit for public worship,’ said the minister; ‘and happily we serve One who has said, “I will have mercy and not sacrifice.” But, to speak plainly, I am troubled about Matt. He has not been himself for a week past, and I fear lest he may have taught and studied too much, and may require change.’

‘Change!’ echoed Mrs. Unwin, in her thinnest tone. ‘Why should he want change? You don’t want change, and you work a deal harder than he does.’

‘I,’ returned the minister, with his pleasant smile; ‘I am an old cart-horse, who settled down to work long ago; but Matt is a colt hardly yet broken, and perhaps the harness his father chose for him chafes his young spirit. I too may have been wrong in urging the ministry upon him. I may have taken my own desire for the will of God.’

‘No, father, no,’ ventured Grace; and forgetful of Matt’s talk yesterday, she continued, ‘He is so gifted, he would have such power to win souls. Oh, I believe the call must come.’

‘I trust so, I trust so; but I should wish him to take counsel with a discreet and godly minister. I shall therefore send him to stay a few days with Mr. Batt, who has often kindly invited him; thus he will get change and counsel at the same time.’

The Rev. Gamaliel Batt, like Mr. Unwin, belonged to the sect of Independents. He served the most important chapel in Dulford, and being a man with immense belief in his own powers, he had succeeded in inspiring others with an immense belief in them too. He had some learning, especially in Hebrew,

of which he was reported to know more than any minister of the Establishment for ten miles round—a thing that might easily be. In imposingness of person, in readiness and magniloquence of speech, and in a certain earnestness kept always on view, Mr. Batt was undeniably superior to the minister of Aldbourne; but as scholar, divine, or man, he was as undeniably his inferior. Few people, however, could perceive this. A shallow world, whether secular or religious, demands but little depth in its teachers; consequently Mr. Batt was greatly esteemed amongst his brethren, and was, in fact, a sort of Dissenting bishop.

‘I should have thought that you were a better judge than Mr. Batt,’ said Mrs. Unwin, with some bitterness, ‘knowing the boy as you do. But there—you’re always putting yourself in the background.’

Mrs. Unwin was not envious of the position occupied by the Dulford dignitary, she merely felt assured that had her husband been but half as pushing a man as Mr. Batt, he might be equally famous and equally well paid.

‘The background is a safe place,’ returned

the minister, with a serene smile. 'As to Mr. Batt's fitness for judging in this matter, he has far more experience with candidates for the ministry than I have; I should therefore feel confidence in his decision, and shall write to him before the meeting to-night.'

The hour of the weekly prayer-meeting was seven o'clock, and at about ten minutes to that hour the minister's household, including the maid Kezia, set out for the service, leaving Matt to sleep off his headache.

The front door had hardly closed upon the chapel-goers when a bedroom window was opened, and Matt, no longer pale and drooping, but with bright cheeks and sparkling eyes, put his head out and gazed around. A moment more and he set foot on the thick branches of an old pear-tree, which for generations had been trained against the house, and in a twinkling he descended to the ground. Directly he touched earth he took to his heels, ran out at the side gate and towards the river. Turning to the right he dashed into the wharf where the great barges, so much in request at this time, were built. The wharf was a place

where most people loved to linger — the trees lying everywhere around like dead giants, upon the hugest of which the village children balanced planks and rode see-saw ; the pits half full of soft, sweet-smelling dust ; the great dim boat-house with its pleasant scents now of freshly-sawn wood, now of pitch ; the little Ald, from which the village takes its name, flowing merrily under the wooden bridge into the Ullen ; the river shallows, set with tall reeds and full of minnows ; the rush of water over the weir ; — all these things made loitering easy. But Matt ran by without a glance, and had left the wharf, crossed the Thorpe road, and reached the end of the first of those meadows which border the Ullen on its way to Dulford, when the church clock struck seven.

It was a lovely evening, with the warmth of summer and the freshness of spring ; brightness and colour and beautiful forms were all around, yet Matt heeded none of them. On he ran as if for life, startling a solitary fisherman, who sat on the river's bank dreamily watching his float in the stream. At the end of the second meadow he left the tow-path,

made a short cut through the lush grass — caring nothing for all the farmers in the world — jumped over the little brook that bounds the parish of Aldbourne, crossed a field of young turnips, and was out on the Dulford road. Here he cast an eager glance in the direction of Aldbourne, but no creature was in sight.

‘Not a wheel of any sort to be seen,’ he muttered, ‘and it must be quite ten minutes past seven. Avoiding the village has cost time — I shall have to run all the way.’

There was no help for it, so off went Matt again at a smart pace, when presently the cheering sound of a horse’s trot struck on his ears. He looked round and saw a gig drawn by a sinewy cob, in whose driver he gladly recognised Mr. Dixon of Poppy Farm.

Mr. Dixon was a man of middle age, with a thin weather-beaten countenance, guarded by a quantity of stiff whisker, above which a pair of small sharp eyes shone keenly — ‘for all the world like a rat a-peerin’ out of a birch broom,’ said a village wit. Now, though the farmer was one of those staunch Churchmen

who held out against sending his boys to a Dissenting school, however superior and convenient, yet he always had a nod and a smile for Matt Hare.

‘Want a lift?’ he cried, pulling up his horse.

‘Thank you, sir, O thank you!’ responded Matt, springing into the gig before it came to a standstill. ‘I do so want to get to Dulford quickly.’

‘Here, take care you don’t sit on my drover’s best hat,’ said Mr. Dixon, removing from the seat a tall hat, tied up in a large red and yellow handkerchief. ‘He’s got to drive some yowes into Dulford o’ Saturday, an’ to bring back some heifers o’ Monday, so he reckons to stay Sunday in town, an’ he seemed mighty partikler about his church-goin’ clothes—he’s got sweetheartin’ in his head, I warrant—so as I’d to drive in to Dulford this evenin’ to see a man, I thought I’d better bring ’em. — But where are you off in such a hurry? Goin’ to a Ranter’s meetin’?’

‘I am going for some books,’ said Matt, in much confusion.

‘Lads in general is more for runnin’ away from books than runnin’ arter ’em, and as it’s rather late to be goin’ shoppin’, we’d better make haste,’ said Mr. Dixon, giving his companion a comical glance, and therewith touching up his cob, who went off at a spanking pace, though not so fast as Matt’s desires, which Eclipse himself could hardly have out-run. ‘I expect your book-buyin’ won’t take much time,’ continued the farmer, ‘but if you like to wait for me at the “Lion,” I’ll bring you home; I shan’t be in town more’n a couple of hours.’

‘Thank you, sir, you are very kind, but — O look! who is that coming? Yes, it is he. What shall I do? I don’t want to meet him. Please stop.’

Matt’s sudden agitation was caused by the sight of a vehicle in the distance, a wide cart with a shambling mare and a stout driver — there could be no mistake; the man was that respectable grocer, Deacon Masters. Matt thought of jumping down and hiding in the hedge — of crouching under the gig-apron — anything to escape the gaze of those steely-

blue eyes always drawing nearer, when a better shift than either of these occurred to him.

‘What? The man a-comin’?’ said Mr. Dixon, with a knowing wink. ‘It strikes me, young gentleman, that you’re out on a lark. Well, I won’t tell of you. Why, what’s the lad a-doin’? You’re welcome, you’re welcome. I never saw such a thing in my life. You’re a fine mountebank, you are. I shouldn’t know you from Adam.’

Matt had seized the drover’s handkerchief and hat; the former he had wound round his firm neck and short defiant chin; the latter he had pulled over his shining eyes. But his eyes were shining no longer; not only had they taken a vacant stare, but an owl-like film obscured them, wrinkles were at their corners, while round his mouth appeared deep lines. His square shoulders shrank, his chest went in, his back came out; he was the picture of an old tramp picked up on the road.

His charioteer gazed at him for a minute in broad admiration, but as the cart approached he turned away, and tried hard to pull a care-

less face, with the result of screwing his lips into a most suspicious smirk.

And now Deacon Masters was close at hand; Matt could see the light blue eyes, the tufts of sandy hair and whisker, the broad self-satisfied countenance. The deacon touched his hat deprecatingly to Mr. Dixon, as if sorely loth to yield that mark of respect. But business was business, and Farmer Dixon, if a hard man at a bargain, was not only one of the grocer's best customers, but as good pay as anybody in Aldbourne.

'How do, Mr. Masters?' called the farmer, choking with suppressed laughter as he saw the unconscious look bestowed by the deacon on Matt.

It was an awful moment for the lad; his breath came short, he went deadly pale, but so he only the more resembled the character he played. The two vehicles had hardly passed one another when Mr. Dixon, unable to contain himself longer, burst into a smothered 'Ha, ha.'

'Pray, sir; pray don't laugh,' besought

Matt in an agonised whisper. 'He'll suspect there's something.'

'Not he, not he. He's tricked as fine as fine can be, for all he reckons himself a damask blade for sharpness,' returned Mr. Dixon, with a hearty guffaw. 'Why, young man, you're a real born play-actor. I never saw anybody in a theatre do it better. Come, come; why don't you give up the notion o' preachin' — a-makin' folks dismal an' doleful — an' take to makin' 'em laugh? You could do it an' no mistake.'

'Do you think I could?' asked Matt, wild rapture swelling at his heart. 'And do you think I could make them cry too?'

'What on earth should you want to do that for? I never could see no good in cryin'. I hate to have anybody cry, an' if my children cried like some folk's youngsters do, I should go clean mad. But bless you! all o' mine know that they mustn't cry, or they 'ud get summat to cry for; an' you'll never hear a squall in my house from year's end to year's end. So my advice is, if you want to make people cry, you'd better stay a preacher.'

‘But you know, sir, to be a tragedian is grander than to be a comedian,’ returned Matt enthusiastically, as he took off his disguise. ‘Moving people to pity—to tears—is a finer thing than moving them to laughter.’

‘May be, may be; but I ’ud rather not be one o’ them that’s moved to be miserable, an’ if you set up as a tear-drawer, I shan’t come anigh you. Look here, lad, there’s plenty o’ real wretchedness in the world without pretendin’ any—we want to laugh, we do.’

While Mr. Dixon expounded his views on the drama his horse trotted gaily on, the pleasant hills and woods were left behind, the river vanished from view, and upon a flat tract of land the red houses of Dulford rose to sight.

The approach to Dulford by the Aldbourne road, though at the time of our story less encumbered with buildings than now, was commonplace enough; but the most prosaic spot on earth takes a strange beauty in the low light, and this evening the golden glow made even Dulford look inviting. To Matt’s eyes, indeed, it shone resplendent as formerly

did El Dorado to the imaginations of the seekers after that wondrous city, for it promised satisfaction to his strongest desires.

Mr. Dixon put Matt down, as requested, opposite the first turning into Monk Street, and, pausing ere he drove off, said, with a comical look—

‘ You’re up to some game you’d rather keep dark, so I shan’t ask no questions, then I shan’t hear no stories ; and if you care for a lift back, be at the “ Lion ” at nine.’

CHAPTER IV

GRACE INTERCEPTS A BURGLAR

THE weekly prayer-meeting at Aldbourne chapel was an occasion for any male member of the congregation to make a public uplifting of himself to heaven. The Wesleyans at their class-meetings allowed, if they did not encourage, female oratory; but the Independents, in face of the widely-spread belief that woman is both more religious and more ready of speech than man, ruled with St. Paul that their women should 'keep silence in the churches.' As the most unlettered man might speak, it may be easily surmised how often Mr. Unwin's sense of the fitness of things was wounded; sometimes indeed a humble brother showed a fervour in supplication which went to the minister's heart, but as a rule he had need of large tolerance while

listening to the outpouring of his flock. With the lack of grammar, and even with the lack of meaning, which frequently marked these utterances, he could patiently bear ; with the turgid and, worse, the familiar manner wherein some speakers addressed the Deity he could bear but impatiently, while the erotic style, favoured of Moravians, and occasionally adopted by Wesleyans, he had long ago sternly forbidden.

Mr. Unwin's own prayer was short, and taken principally from the Liturgy of the Church, which he regarded as the type and pattern of the petitions fit to be offered by man to his Maker. He turned to the old words the more gladly because he had a distrust of his own power in unstudied speech. His distrust made the preparation of the two Sunday sermons a serious matter, and cost him many an hour of hard thought and work. The discourses thus painfully brought to birth were full of deep meaning, but this was set forth in a manner so coherent, and in a style so clear, as ordinarily to make it plain even to the unlearned frequenters of Aldbourne chapel.

As a preacher Mr. Unwin differed widely from the majority of his brother ministers, who were apt to be as glib in speech as they were lacking in thought—men who would pile heaps of texts on acceptable platitudes, or repeat themselves untiringly, or enlarge upon a tiny matter until, like the geni in the *Arabian Nights*, it assumed gigantic if vapoury proportions, causing one to doubt whether it could have issued from such a very small pot and be destined to return thither. It must be allowed that Mr. Unwin's teaching was meat for strong men, but this was on the whole better for his people's spiritual growth than the uniform milk diet with which many pastors feed their flocks, to say nothing of the milk-and-water so persistently offered by others.

As an Independent Mr. Unwin was of course a Calvinist, and Calvinism, as everybody knows, tends to produce strength rather than sweetness; but in the minister's character the former was almost concealed beneath the latter, as well-carven marble hides its solidity under its beauty.

To-night the prayer-meeting was soon over, for Deacon Masters did not appear, and the omission of his always lengthy oration shortened the evening's exercise. Mr. Masters called his oration a prayer; as a matter of fact, however, it had nothing of supplication in it, but was a didactic setting forth of what its utterer took to be 'the plan of salvation,' and was delivered as if calculated to enlighten both earth and heaven.

Mr. Masters being absent, the principal speaker, after the minister, was Deacon Penny, a small dark man with a pale face and quick black eyes. Mr. Penny had formerly kept a green-grocer's shop in Dulford, but, bequeathed a sufficient income by a relative, he had quitted Dulford and business for Aldbourne and ease, contriving to fill his unlearned leisure with gardening and gossiping. If you live in town, dear reader, a male gossip may very possibly appear to you a fictitious personage; the country folk, however, know him well, nearly every English village being enlivened by his tattle.

Mr. Penny was not, in the eyes of Deacon

Masters, a man of such strict life as became his profession and office, and indeed the loquacious Penny sometimes inadvertently revealed an acquaintance with worldly amusements quite out of place in one who was supposed to have renounced all these. Yet he did not merit the hard name of hypocrite, being simply one of the many who, without strong religious convictions, are attracted to Nonconformity by the greater figure they can make as Dissenters than as Churchmen. At chapel Mr. Penny was an important person — at church he would have been a nobody.

Now, voluble as Mr. Penny was in common talk, he had no ability in set speech; his words to-night, therefore, were few, and the meeting came to an earlier end than usual. Brief, however, as it had been, to Grace it seemed long; she wanted it over, that she might know whether Matt's headache had gone; so hurrying her mother away from the handshakings and friendly babble with which the service concluded, she accompanied her quickly home. But Matt was not to be seen

downstairs ; moreover, Mrs. Unwin's knock at his bedroom door gained no response.

‘He must be asleep, and soundly too,’ said the good woman, and forthwith she gently turned the door handle. ‘It is locked, I declare !’ she cried. ‘I don’t like that. Suppose there was a fire and we couldn’t wake him, he would be burned in his bed — I really must rouse him.’

But Mr. Unwin, entering, was taken into counsel, and advising that the lad should be left in peace for to-night, and to-morrow be instructed not to lock his door, no further attempts were made to arouse the sleeper.

Mrs. Unwin held that the going to bed betimes was as necessary a practice for the Christian as truth or honesty, and according to custom, at an early hour Grace retired to rest. She did not sleep readily, however, for thought was busy in her mind. She often lay thus awake, brooding over household cares, or over some suggestive words her father had spoken ; but the narrow things of the house, and the narrow way of her religion, did not

monopolise her thoughts; she had another subject of meditation, a subject which became daily more engrossing — Matt. The gentle being, half housewife, half devotee, was growing into the impassioned woman. To-night she was perturbed, not by anxiety for Matt's bodily condition, but by uneasiness as to his state of mind. Never until yesterday had she heard him frankly question his call to the ministry; misgivings he had sometimes expressed, but only such as might be set down to the humility of a young soul contemplating a great task. And now he had spoken openly of doubt as to his vocation. Still, it was often hard to know whether Matt were in jest or in earnest, and he might possibly have responded to the rector's questions with intent to mystify a man whose off-hand manner had annoyed him. Soothed by this view of the matter, Grace lay between awake and asleep for a long time, when she was suddenly quite aroused by the sound of cautious footsteps on the gravel path beneath her window. For a moment she was frightened, but the next she remembered how once her father had been

called to a dying woman late at night. This might be another such a call. She sprang out of bed, ran to her window, which, like Matt's, looked out over the garden, and opened the casement wide. Thrusting out her head, she saw the dim figure of a man climbing up the pear-tree. He had reached Matt's window, and even as she looked, his legs struggled a little and disappeared within. She rushed into the passage, and knocked at Matt's door.

'Matt, Matt!' she cried out, loudly as she supposed, but in reality the words came as a mere gasp.

'What is it?' asked Matt, withdrawing the key, and whispering through its hole. 'Pray, don't wake anybody.'

'A man—a robber—has just got in at your window,' replied Grace, in extreme bewilderment.

'It was I,' said Matt. 'I was so hot; I climbed out on the pear-tree for some air. I am sorry I frightened you.'

'Only you!' exclaimed Grace, amazingly relieved.

‘Only I. Pray speak low; you will wake them.’

‘And are you better?’

‘Yes, much better — well.’

‘I am glad. Good-night.’

CHAPTER V

MATT IS PROMISED A HOLIDAY

MATT came down the next morning declaring himself to be quite well, but there was a feverish brightness about his eyes and cheeks which both the minister and Grace noted with some uneasiness. The appetite he showed at breakfast might well have set anxiety at rest, but his friends were used to his capacity for disposing of food, and Mr. Unwin still pondered on the necessity of change for him.

Directly after breakfast Grace went into the yard to feed her fowls, and Matt strolled round the garden. Hither the minister presently followed him, and found him staring in an absent fashion at a bed of cabbages. He started violently as Mr. Unwin laid a gentle hand upon his shoulder.

‘Why, my lad,’ said the minister kindly,

‘you cannot be well, to start in this way. Indeed for some days I have thought you out of health, and felt sure that you wanted either medicine or change.’

‘I want neither, sir,’ returned Matt, flushing painfully. In truth, a sharp prick of remorse pierced his heart at the soft touch, the kind voice. But even as he winced, his secret passion overpowered all his qualms. ‘And yet I don’t know,’ he faltered. ‘A little change is very pleasant. I was going to ask you, sir, if I might accept Mr. Plowden’s invitation to his sheap-shearing this afternoon. He asked me to stay all night, as it is a long, lonely walk home.’

‘Mr. Plowden is a serious-minded man,’ said Mr. Unwin thoughtfully; ‘but I am afraid that his wife is rather of a gay turn; at any rate, she has worldly friends who lead her astray — I have even heard that at one of these festivals there was dancing.’

‘I don’t believe that Mr. Plowden would allow dancing if Matt were present,’ said Grace, who had now joined the pair. ‘He is very scrupulous about ministers.’

‘He is, as you say, careful in respect of ministers,’ returned Mr. Unwin; ‘and moreover, he is a worthy man, and a kind friend.’

‘Then, sir, may I go and stay the night?’ asked Matt, watching the minister’s face as a lover might watch the face of his half-consenting mistress.

‘Yes, you may do so; but you must come back early in the morning, because I have planned a further outing for you. It is to Mr. Batt’s. He has often invited you, and at last I have written to fix to-morrow afternoon. You are glad, my boy, I see.’

At the first mention of Mr. Batt’s name Matt had looked very glum, but suddenly his face lightened.

‘And I am to go to Dulford to-morrow afternoon,’ he murmured, as if hardly believing his good fortune.

‘How long shall you stay?’ asked Grace, as she gazed in perplexity at the changes of Matt’s countenance.

‘Probably a week, for that was the time mentioned by Mr. Batt when he gave the invitation,’ said the minister. ‘I want you

to take counsel with him, my boy, concerning your call to the ministry. You may speak quite openly to him, and he will be a better judge in the matter than I, as having no leaning either way. But we will talk more about this presently; it is nearly school-time now.'

As he said this Mr. Unwin went off towards the house, leaving the young people together.

'So you are to go to Dulford,' said Grace. 'How pleasant!'

'Pleasant!' retorted Matt sharply; 'I doubt if you would find it pleasant to be delivered over to Don Pomposo's sounding brass. O how I hate a man who talks of God as if he enjoyed a monopoly of the subject!'

'Matt!' cried Grace aghast. 'How can you speak so of a respected minister — a good man!'

'Unfortunately his goodness has the invariable effect of stirring up my badness. And even you, little Gracie, once told me that you longed to shake him.'

'Well, he really was rather overbearing then.'

'Of course; he can't be anything else';

and changing his light manner to an imitation of Mr. Batt's grand style, Matt continued — 'Lesser men may argue; *I* lay down the law. Lesser men are puzzled over this question and that; *I* have an epitome of the universe in my waistcoat pocket.'

'Pray don't mimic,' cried Grace, between vexation and laughter. 'Father would be so grieved, and I don't understand you either; for I am sure, though you looked cross when you first heard of this visit, you looked very pleased afterwards.'

'I thought of old Pomposo first, and of his fair daughters afterwards,' returned Matt, taking off his hat, and bowing in imitation of the wonderful bows he had seen performed by Sir Pertinax MacSycophant last night.

'They are not pretty,' said Grace thoughtfully.

'Pretty! O no; but what of that? Beauty is generally a "proud, vain, saucy, expensive, impertinent sort of a commodity"; besides —

Kindness in women, not their beauteous looks,
Shall win my love!'

Matt was certainly never likely to be dumb for lack of a quotation. Grace looked at him inquiringly for a moment, and then demanded — ‘Are they clever?’

‘No. Fate has been kinder to them than that; she has granted them to believe entirely in the cleverness of their father. I used to pity them for being condemned to listen perpetually to Gamaliel’s magnificent nothings, but I might have spared my compassion, for I have since found that they think him equal to Chrysostom the golden-mouthed, and honestly suppose that when Wesley and Whitefield are forgotten, Gamaliel Batt will shine in the theological firmament with undimmed lustre.’

‘I can’t think what has come to you lately,’ observed Grace reprovingly. ‘You talk in such a wild way, even before my father. He said the other day he hoped you wouldn’t waste all your wit in words.’

‘How would anybody know I had wit if it were not for words?’ retorted Matt good-humouredly. ‘Still, I confess that I talk “an infinite deal of nothing”; and you are a good,

patient little girl to bear with me. What should I do without you? You are my comrade, my sister, my —'

Matt stopped suddenly, but if a look may ever stand in place of a word, the one he gave Grace might have done so; it set her heart beating fast, and brought a warm flush to her face.

'How pretty you are, Gracie! You put me in mind of a dove,' he said softly, and again stopped; and in the silence the church clock struck nine.

'School-time!' ejaculated Grace, turning away her tell-tale cheeks, and thus by her embarrassment cutting short the very words she desired to hear.

So they two walked into the house, and Matt went away to the schoolroom, while Grace set about her daily work. She generally performed her domestic duties briskly, but to-day she was inclined to linger. With a duster in her hand, she stood over the old square piano, forgetting to rub the keys. 'Pretty,' she murmured more than once. From her babyhood she had been taught that 'beauty is

vain'; yet, in spite of teaching, and even of conviction, she could not suppress a thrill of pleasure at each repetition of Matt's word. All day she was in a dreamy state, causing her mother to speak rather sharply several times. In a preoccupied mood, however, the thinnest-skinned mortals are somewhat impervious to the briers of this work-a-day world, and Grace, who always met her mother's reproofs with a certain serenity, now heeded them not at all.

In the afternoon she took her mending out under the great apple-tree, and here she darned and dreamed, while the hot sun above was doing his best to change the fast-fading apple-blossoms to fruit. Grace did not give a thought to Nature's great process overhead; absorbed in meditation, she even lost count of time, until she was startled by the church clock striking four. Was it so late? Then Matt must have gone without bidding her good-bye. Surely he could not have seen her sitting there; and yet the apple-tree was plainly visible from the house. In truth Matt had spied her, but anxious to be spared question-

ing, had again avoided her, and had stolen out by the front door; it is so much easier to act a lie than to tell one, and by some sophistical reasoning it appears also less sinful.

A shadow came over the brightness of Grace's day, but only for a little while; the morning's joy was too great to be long clouded, and in its light she lived until the coming of night. Her happiness did not, however, cause her to forget that where one man had climbed another might climb, and before going to bed she carefully fastened Matt's windows.

CHAPTER VI

GRACE DISCOVERS AN ENDYMION

SATURDAY was a busy day in the minister's household, none but quite necessary work being left for Sunday. Before breakfast, therefore, Grace went out to feed her fowls. The stable, which had not been put to its proper use since the doctor's time, was now a hen-roost, while the coach-house had become a receptacle for all sorts of things. In it Grace kept her stock of what the farmers called 'tailing' wheat, the accepted food for fowls; and this morning as usual she entered her storehouse for the daily portion. As she stepped within she started back in great alarm. Upon, or rather in, a fine heap of straw lay Matt, quite motionless. Grace was one of those self-repressed women who never scream, and although she shrank it was but for a moment;

the next she was kneeling beside the prostrate figure.

As she bent over it she saw the red on cheeks and lips, and saw the chest heave. Matt was only sleeping, then; but why here? Disturbed by her movement he stirred, threw up his arm, and cried, 'Belvidera, poor Belvidera!' Grace had not the least notion who Belvidera might be, but the pathetic ring in Matt's voice went to her heart. Almost as he spoke Matt opened his eyes and stared bewildered at the kneeling Grace. He had seen a vision of the City of the Sea; had beheld the moon shining on the still lagoon, on churches and palaces; he had heard the plash of the gondolier's oar, and the bell of St. Mark's tolling. The Dulford Theatre offered no scenic illusion; in fact, at the time of our story even the great London theatres attempted but little in the way of spectacle. Acting was everything; stage properties were nothing. Yet it fell out that a vast number of theatre-goers, having their imaginations stimulated by fine acting, could make a Venice or what not for themselves. Probably, indeed, the Venice

thus pictured would be a fairer one than any manager can put upon the boards. Thus had it been with Matt, and the vision and the actor who conjured it up still haunted his brain. He was seeing a dark fascinating face, was hearing a passionate voice roll forth Otway's grandiose verse, when, suddenly waking, he beheld the dim old coach-house, and Grace in her poky sun-bonnet, and heard her say, 'Matt, why are you here?'

He yawned, stretched himself, looked up at the cobwebs gracefully festooning the roof above him, made a great effort to discriminate between dream and reality, and replied —

'I got up when Mr. Plowden did — with the lark, you know — thinking it would be pleasant to walk home in the early morning. But when I arrived I found the house asleep, so I came in here, lay down, and must have gone to sleep too.'

'Indeed you must,' said Grace, smiling at her own fright. 'You were so sound asleep that for a moment I thought you were dead. I hope you are not cold.'

'No, I am not cold,' said Matt, sitting up.

‘Straw makes a very good bed — almost as good as beech leaves.’

‘Did you enjoy yourself?’ asked Grace, with a smile at the allusion.

‘Yes, O yes!’ said Matt from the depths of his heart.

‘Who were there?’

‘Lots of folks. But, Grace, I am hungry after my walk. Can you get me a piece of bread?’

Grace went off, and quickly reappeared with a goodly slice of bread and butter, which Matt ate, reposing upon his heap of straw, while Grace fed her poultry, and by the time both had finished they were called to breakfast.

For the usually welcome meal Matt had no appetite; he had spoiled it, Grace decided, by his antepast. In fact, the sight of Mr. Unwin’s kind undoubting face troubled him. He could not deceive, without wincing, the man he revered, and the old habits of truth and loyalty had a fresh struggle with his hidden passion. Nor could he indulge in a pleasure which he had been taught to consider

in the highest degree sinful without grievous qualms. But Matt's acquiescence in the dictum of the religious world — for at this time pious Churchmen as well as Dissenters held the theatre in horror — was not the fruit of conviction, it was simply the acceptance so often yielded by youth to the decision of those in whom it trusts, before the fatal spirit of questioning comes to turn the serene faith of childhood into confusion.

Ill at ease, then, Matt kept his eyes for the most part on his plate, hoping that no one would be curious about the sheep-shearing, and so cause him to load his conscience with any addition to the lies already sitting pretty heavily upon it. Happily Saturday's breakfast was usually a silent one; the minister had the morrow's sermons on his mind, and his family respected his preoccupation. Mrs. Unwin, too, was strangely thoughtful. The state of her husband's best coat was this morning sadly present to her mind, and she pondered any possible way of restoring it — replacing it seemed quite out of the question. Brushing was of no avail — it only made shini-

ness more shiny ; the renewing of the collar and cuffs could not again be attempted. During the dull winter days it had not provoked remark, but now the June sun would soon shine on it, and bring its shabbiness into strong relief. Moreover, there had already come some of the usual invitations to anniversary gatherings at the neighbouring chapels, to say nothing of their own festival, which always fell early in the summer. What was to be done ? If only certain defaulting parents could be brought to pay their long-owed sums ; but the law alone could compel them to do this, and Mr. Unwin had as great a horror of the law practically as theologically.

‘I can’t think what we shall do about your father’s coat,’ said Mrs. Unwin, directly the minister and Matt had left the parlour. ‘It isn’t fit for wearing even at home on Sundays. I’m sure last Sabbath, when the sun shone through the chapel window on it, I could have cried to see how worn and shiny it looked — and he’s got to preach for Mr. Batt soon, and there’s our anniversary, and ever so many more.’

‘Mr. Batt’s doesn’t signify so much,’ said Grace, showing a disposition to make the best of things. ‘He will wear a gown to preach in Mr. Batt’s chapel.’

‘Well, there’s some good in a gown,’ responded Mrs. Unwin, for the first time viewing the unnecessary garment with complacency. ‘Still, he’ll have to walk to and from chapel beside Mr. Batt in his brand-new broadcloth, and most likely the sun will shine ever so bright.’

‘Perhaps one of the fathers who owe money will pay,’ ventured Grace, as her mother stopped, overcome by the grievous contrast she foresaw; ‘or perhaps there will be a better collection, or somebody will send a present.’

‘A present!’ sighed Mrs. Unwin, shaking her head; ‘there’s friends would send a present if they knew — but we never begged yet — and as to those cheating fathers paying, or there being a sovereign more in the collection, you might as well expect manna from heaven.’

Grace looked at her mother in deep sym-

pathy. Only when circumstances wrought her to a white heat did Mrs. Unwin indulge in flights of language.

‘O dear, dear! How I wish it fell now!’ cried the girl, all her optimism forsaking her. ‘What a mint of contriving and worrying it would save — no butcher nor grocer to pay — O mother!’

‘Well, well, child, we’ve always had enough,’ returned Mrs. Unwin, fearful lest she should sin against Christian contentment.

‘Have we?’ said Grace, with most unwonted bitterness. ‘You and father have not always had enough, if we children have.’

‘It was no matter for me,’ said Mrs. Unwin heroically, though she felt on the verge of tears. ‘I’ve not had to teach and preach, like your father.’

‘No; but you have had to work and contrive, and never rest,’ said Grace, remembering with remorse how impatient she had sometimes felt at her mother’s devotion to little things, when it was this very devotion which had kept her family from actual distress.

We are told in the Book of Proverbs that the wise woman buildeth her house, but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands. Mrs. Unwin had, according to her ability, played the part of the wise woman.

CHAPTER VII

KING LEAR

HARDLY able to believe in the good luck which sent him openly to Dulford, Matt set out thither early on Saturday afternoon. The morning's half-repentance had lingered with him awhile, but as time passed, and brought nearer the hour when the wizard, who drew him as the magnet draws the needle, should put forth his power in the grandest of his impersonations, the lad's conscience fell entirely under the dominion of passion, and he bade good-bye even to Mr. Unwin without compunction.

As he trudged along he decided that it would be too late, after the play, to go to Mr. Batt's; he must therefore find a bed at an inn, and present himself to the great man in time for the chapel service on the morrow. Mr. Batt would, of course, question him as to

his non-arrival on the appointed afternoon, and also as to the supposed Sabbath-day's journey. He must trust to the inspiration of the moment to bring him safely out of the catechism, for he could not plan untruths.

Saturday was market-day at Dulford, but on the road Matt met very few vehicles, since, at the date of our story, farmers and dealers did not hurry away from the sociable ordinary, but showed themselves appreciative of the charms of good fellowship. To be sure, this conviviality not unfrequently caused the more persistent loiterers to have but insecure seats on horseback or in gigs, yet very seldom did any accident happen to these bemuddled men, and even sober persons were constrained to acknowledge that Providence watched over drunken folk.

Matt got no lift into town, but that did not matter; his feet carried him along easily enough, and almost too fast, since he arrived in Dulford while the inns were yet crowded, and he waited a long time ere he dared venture into one and demand a bed. Presently, however, after hanging about until he

was sick of the streets, he stole into a modest house in Monk Street, bearing the sign of the 'Wheel,' and, relieved to find that the landlord did not wear the face of Deacon Masters, he bespoke a night's lodging.

As the 'Wheel' stood near the goal of Matt's desires, there was no need to have gone forth so early as he did, but he could not rest. Hurrying down the street, he soon reached a small and ugly building, which might easily have been taken for a Dissenting chapel had it not borne upon its front, in large gilt letters, the words—'Theatre Royal.' Here about a dozen dramatic enthusiasts had already clustered. Matt joined them, and in a little while quite a crowd—that is, a country-town crowd—gathered round, and waited impatiently the opening of the door. The exciting moment came at last; the crowd pushed into the little house, each man intent on getting the best seat he could. Matt's two former visits hither had taught him how to proceed. He now secured a good place, and, quite regardless of the assembling company, stared in a fever of expectation at the dingy

curtain. The canny Scot, Sir Pertinax MacSycophant, was a character quite unsuited to Kean, yet the representation had delighted Matt; while the vacillating Jaffier, whom even Kean's genius could not rescue from contempt, had enchanted him. What, then, might he not anticipate from King Lear?

Many county gentry were present; indeed they far outnumbered the townsfolk, the latter being hindered from coming either by their own scruples or by what were more insurmountable—the scruples of friends. Dulford was a grave town, not given to smile on worldly amusements. In it all sorts of Dissenters, and especially Quakers, abounded; in it also lived a number of small gentry. These two circumstances, combined with the fact that it boasted a large hog-market, gave rise to the common saying that Dulford was celebrated for three P's—pigs, pride, and piety.

Yet, though the townspeople frowned on the stage, to-night the little theatre was crammed quite full before the play began, and the whole house eagerly waited the rise of the curtain. As everybody knows, there

are in the first scene of the night's play but a few words between Kent and Gloucester ere, with the sound of trumpets, the king enters. It must be confessed that on this occasion the sennet was blown by a single trumpeter on a very hoarse instrument; candour also allows that the interior now figuring as Lear's palace had already done duty as the library of Sir Pertinax MacSycophant, and as the Venetian Senate-House, and that the dresses of the performers were by no means suggestive of the Court of an ancient British sovereign. Not a soul, however, cared about the lack of fitness in the stage properties. People had come to see acting, and acting they did see, such as is only a memory now.

Edmund Kean had for some time past shown signs of failing health. The struggles of his youth, the passionate histrionic nature possessed by him in such fulness, the unfortunate dependence he had learned to put in ardent drink for the recruiting of exhaustion — all these things had combined to age him before his time. Yet though when off the stage a feeble, trembling, and almost decrepit

man, upon it he was still the great magician who could rule all hearts. He is now before the audience, acknowledging with his ever graceful bow the welcoming applause. This is the only moment in which he seems conscious of spectators at all ; after it he is Edmund Kean no more, but Lear — ay, and the little insignificant man is every inch a king. He treads the boards with the step of age indeed, but of royal age, and is the perfect realisation of what we imagine of the domineering, impulsive, affectionate father. His childish displeasure with Cordelia and the fatuous giving away of his kingdom are seen to be signs of dotage, yet the dotage is that of a born ruler of men ; the sense of royalty intensifies his passion, yet that passion is with profound truth represented as rather of the spirit than of the body.

With ever-growing emotion the house hung on the great actor's words as thought evidently followed thought in his mind. In this clear sequence of thought the man's artistic skill shone forth, and made a delightful contrast to the set style affected by too many players of

both sexes and of every time, which style plainly indicates that when an actor speaks the first word of a passage he knows the last.

The annals of the stage record how electric was the effect of Kean's acting, how by it even veteran play-goers were moved out of themselves. Small wonder, then, that Matt should be shaken with passion, thrilled with tenderness, melted with pity. Indeed, he lost every particle of self-consciousness, and was Kent, attendant on the outraged father. When the monarch made his protest to Regan —

Dear daughter, I confess that I am old,

Matt clasped his hands and sucked in his breath, as if waiting the effect of the appeal, and through the remainder of the scene, as the actor delineated the first waverings of the monarch's mind until it tottered upon the brink of madness, the lad sat trembling with excitement, till at the cry —

No, you unnatural hags !

he started wildly to his feet, but was pulled down again by a stolid-looking man next him.

During the wild pathos of the succeeding scenes Matt might have said with Edgar —

My tears begin to take his part,
while later on, when, out of his madness, the king, half recognising his once spurned daughter, utters the heart-moving speech which begins —

Pray, do not mock me,
Matt burst into actual sobs ; nor did he weep alone — the whole house bore him company, and not a plaudit interrupted the tearful tribute to the actor's power. But the climax was reached when, Cordelia dead, the wretched Lear hung over her, watching for motion in the feather held before her lips, when the cry —

Cordelia, Cordelia ! stay a little,
rang out in wildest entreaty, when, in the very clutch of despair, he exclaimed —

Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never !
Here Matt's emotion drew on him the attention both of spectators and actors. Absorbed as Kean always was in his part, he had a lively perception of the effect he produced on his

audience. He who declared that he could see a sneer across Salisbury Plain might well spy out a demonstrative admirer in the little Dulford theatre. When, therefore, the last words of that wonderful last scene were spoken, and the great actor appeared before the curtain, his gaze rested on Matt with satisfaction. Without doubt the lad's clasped hands, his tear-stained face, his trembling lips, his absolutely adoring eyes, were to Kean more acceptable than all the shouting and cheering around.

On his way out Matt found a small crowd waiting in the lobby to see the last of Kean, who must needs pass out by the common door, there being no other exit from the theatre.

He came leaning on the arm of a faithful friend. His feet stumbled as they moved, his face was dull, almost lethargic. The effect of the spirits he had swallowed had passed in the fierce emotions of the play, and he now looked only the exhausted drunkard. But Matt saw nothing of this. He had elbowed himself to the front, and stood with all his heart in his face. Kean bowed feebly in answer to

the plaudits which greeted him, hardly raising his eyes to his admirers, but before Matt he stopped and held out his hand.

‘You love fine acting,’ he said. ‘You have been happy to-night.’

‘Happy!’ gasped Matt, not knowing if he were standing on his head or his heels. ‘O sir, I have been in heaven.’

‘In heaven, and weeping,’ returned Kean, with a smile, which for a moment chased away the signs of weariness and dissipation on his face. ‘Ah, I see that you are an enthusiast for my art. Have you ever thought of following it?’

‘O sir, if I could!’ cried Matt, all thought of his destined calling, of Mr. Unwin, of Grace, clean swept out of his mind.

‘You have a promising face and figure,’ said Kean, eyeing him critically, ‘and as you can feel so intensely yourself, you ought to be able to make others feel. But I daresay you have the common delusion of the would-be actor; you think, because my style is easy and natural, that I have not had to work, but depend on the sudden impulse of genius. Let

me tell you that there is no such thing as impulsive acting. All is premeditated — studied beforehand. Years of hard study go to make the natural, the impulsive actor.'

'I could work,' murmured Matt.

'Well, well; if you should decide on devoting yourself to the noblest, the most exacting of arts, come and see me in London,' said Kean heavily, as he tottered off.

Matt drew himself up to his full height, and, in his rapturous excitement, struck out his hand with unconscious force. It encountered the ribs of a square-shouldered, finely-set man.

'What are you about, fellow?' cried this person, turning angrily upon Matt, and disclosing features well known to him as those of Mr. Carew, the second son of the squire of Aldbourne, a lieutenant in His Majesty's Hussars. 'Mind you,' continued the outraged officer, 'if a lout can't behave himself, he has no business amongst gentlemen.'

'I had no intention of touching you,' said Matt loftily; 'and as to gentlemen — I am as much a gentleman as you are.'

Now Mr. Carew was apt, as became his profession, to be 'sudden and quick in quarrel,' and having, with the couple of military friends who accompanied him, dined at the 'Lion,' his readiness of hand and tongue had rather increased.

'You are a confounded upstart,' he cried, with a threatening gesture towards Matt. 'A low Ranter's son, skulking into the company of your betters.'

But if Mr. Carew had partaken pretty freely of wine, Matt had drunk a yet more potent draught, and, with blood on fire, he took a step forward, and stood squarely before the officer. Yet even at this stormy moment the ready quotation rushed to his lips —

"'I am a gentleman, and well derived' — as well derived as you,' he said, with a dignity which would have been superb had not the occasion of it been ridiculous. 'My father was a man of good family, a clergyman of the Established Church, and anybody who calls me a Ranter's son is a liar.'

As he spoke the word Mr. Carew gave him a sounding buffet on the ear. Dizzy with

rage and pain, Matt threw himself upon the striker, and hitting out with a vigour which bade fair to make up for lack of science, he showered blows so quickly upon his astonished and rather unsteady foe, as to cause the latter to waver and presently to sway nearly to his fall. 'Look out, Tony,' cried one friend. 'Don't be beaten by a boy,' urged the other, and Mr. Carew, with a great effort, recovered his footing.

Meanwhile the people around did not attempt to separate the brawlers, most of them holding a fight to be a natural and interesting conclusion to any secular public gathering. Even the ladies present were far more excited than alarmed, and, to a woman, took the part of the fair-faced youth with the beautiful voice, red-coat though his opponent might be. But, unknown to the crowd, a man of peace had, at the beginning of the fray, run out in search of a constable, and just as Mr. Carew's friends were thinking it was high time to interfere, each combatant was locked in the grasp of a pair of sturdy arms.

'What do you mean by touching me, you

dog?' panted Mr. Carew, as he struggled with the constable. 'Mind you, I am a gentleman and an officer — Lieutenant Carew of His Majesty's Hussars, and of Deercourt, Aldbourne.'

'I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure,' said the man humbly, but without loosing his hold. 'I didn't know you.'

'I should think not,' returned Mr. Carew haughtily. 'But now you do know, just take your hands off.'

'Well, you see, sir, the law's the law,' objected the man, 'an' if a hoffer's found a-makin' a row —'

'It's that damned Ranter that made the row,' cried Lieutenant Carew, jerking his head towards Matt, who was trying hard to free himself from his captor.

'No, no,' shouted some of the crowd. 'You struck him first.'

'The scoundrel called me a liar.'

A hubbub of voices arose. Mr. Carew's friends got close to him; there was pushing and confusion, a rush to the door, a scud through the streets, and the valiant officer

had taken refuge at his inn, whither, perhaps regarding it as a place of sanctuary, the guardians of the peace did not see fit to follow him. Falling, however, with double force on Matt, they prepared to hale him off to the round-house. In vain did the onlookers protest against this one-sided justice; the constables, having lost one prisoner, were the more determined to hold the other, and, while they were not altogether unwilling that the son of Squire Carew, county potentate and magistrate, should escape, they clutched the unknown wight very securely. Just as they were at the door a man who, with some others, had stood all this while on the gallery stairs, looking at the scene below, was, by the descent of his fellows, carried close up to the constables and their prisoner. He recoiled and slunk away, but not before Matt had recognised him. It was Deacon Penny.

CHAPTER VIII

DEACON PENNY'S STORY

‘MY text is taken from the Apostles’ Creed, which, as you know, is repeated every Sunday in your parish church,’ said Mr. Unwin boldly, when, on the Sunday morning, he stood up to preach in the pulpit of his little chapel. ‘It is—“The Life Everlasting!”’

At the giving out of the text Mr. Masters was half way down the chapel, admonishing some loutish lads in a corner, who were grinning over the futile efforts of a great humble-bee to climb the wall near them. Hearing such strange words he turned sharply round, and looked askance at the speaker. He knew that Mr. Unwin had the Establishment in great esteem, but, really, to put a phrase from the Church Service in the place of Holy Scripture was a strong measure. The

pastor's constant use of the Liturgy in his prayers passed undetected by the deacon, since the latter, born and bred a Nonconformist, had never thought it necessary to become acquainted with the creed from which he dissented.

Other faces besides the deacon's grew questioning, but the mild dignified countenance in the pulpit seemed to rebuke all carping, and no sooner had Mr. Unwin told the reason of his text than the ruffled hearers were soothed to happy attention, and the great critic, himself touched by the story, became indulgent to the teller's odd whim.

In the square pew allotted to the minister's family sat Mrs. Unwin and Grace, the former more troubled than ever by thoughts of the shabby coat, and quite unable to follow its wearer in his discourse on 'The Life Everlasting.' It would indeed have presented a puzzling question to anybody bold enough to have entertained it, how a being like Mrs. Unwin, whose every faculty was devoted to the meanest things of sense, would feel, transported to the tremendous spiritual world

her husband was telling of. Here, if mournful, she was at any rate in her element; there, no imagination could picture her 'at home.'

Grace's quiet face was quieter than ever to-day. Usually the changeful countenance near it somewhat disturbed its serenity, as the wind ruffles the surface of the stillest pool; but the owner of that countenance was in Dulford, doubtless, Grace thought, listening to more sounding speech than her father's. Ah! she hoped that he would be humble with Mr. Batt; would put away the satirical spirit, so unbecoming to a Christian minister; and again she wondered if he would choose the ministry. At this point she became reproachfully conscious of how far her thoughts were wandering from the sermon. The everlasting life of the converted, the sanctified soul, even of her own, was then of less moment to her than was Matt's present well-being. Grace had learned a narrow creed, wherein to save one's own soul was one's first and greatest duty, and she must be pardoned if she felt ashamed of her thought for another.

Mr. Unwin's sermon, as usual, lasted over an hour, while outside the chapel the sun was shining, and little white clouds floated over the wide blue. Surely to have beheld this 'bridal of the earth and sky' would have aroused in a thinking man nobler truer imaginings of the Life Everlasting than any lengthy phrases spun out between four walls. But the consciences of Mr. Unwin's hearers would not have suffered them to loiter by the river or to climb Archer's Hill on what they called the Sabbath-day. Walking abroad, except for the necessary going to chapel or school was a distinct breaking of the Fourth Commandment. Upon the elders of the flock this severe observance of Sunday sat easily enough. They were, for the most part, tired with the week's work; the long chapel services, too, were exhausting, since to keep the mind fixed for hours on spiritual things, without even such aid as a majestic ritual, Jewish, Romish, or English, can give, must, except to saints and angels, be a supreme effort. Then, too, they ate larger dinners than usual; consequently the afternoon was passed in a serene

state of drowsiness, a state which became one of absolute slumber if encouraged by a volume of sermons or any other approved theological work. Mr. Unwin sometimes felt, as he prepared his evening's sermon, that he would fain have left his close little study, and have meditated 'sub Dio' as he loved to do. But he had long been reconciled to the barriers set around him, and revered them much as the saintly à Kempis revered the cloister which separated him from the world. The young folks, however, found Sunday dull enough, and had it not been for the meeting together after services and at school, with the agreeable results of tattle and flirtation — two things which no sect has succeeded in banishing from its midst — they might have been forced into revolt. Matt, remembering the pleasant Sunday walks of his boyhood, when his father was yet a parish parson, sometimes tried to beguile Grace into a short ramble. And sometimes she would be prevailed on to return home from afternoon school by way of the wharf instead of the village, and would linger just a moment to look at the Ald as it

rushed gaily to its marriage with the Ullen, or at the white foam of the river as it tumbled over the weir, or at the changing light in the pools by the willow-fringed islands. Her father never blamed this little detour, but her mother always feared lest the few paces further round should be a breaking of the Sabbath.

But now the hour's sermon is over, the concluding hymn sung, and the people come trooping out of the white-washed chapel into the golden loveliness of the May. Opposite the chapel door stands a fine chestnut-tree; it is in full bloom, and the mid-day sun strikes hotly on its silver cones and broad leaves, but beneath its branches is a dense shade. In this shade linger the two deacons, evidently awaiting their minister, Deacon Masters with his particular air of Sabbath gravity turned to amazement, and Deacon Penny with his eyes shining and his lips twitching in anticipation of the tale he has to tell. Mr. Penny bore no ill will to Matt; on the contrary, he both liked and admired that young gentleman, though occasionally dimly conscious of being a mark

for Matt's wit; but the tongue of a gossip must be wagging, whomsoever it may hurt.

As Mr. Unwin stepped out of chapel his thoughts were running on the last verse of the morning's final hymn —

There shall I bathe my weary soul
In seas of heavenly rest;
And not a wave of trouble roll
Across my peaceful breast.

The words present an aspect of the Life Everlasting which must always have a peculiar charm for the toilers here below, and, dwelling on it, Mr. Unwin would have passed the two men by, but Grace, who hovered near him, more dove-like than ever in the pretty gray frock and bonnet sent by her sister Rachel, noticed Mr. Penny's expectant look.

‘Mr. Penny wants to speak to you, father,’ she said softly.

The minister stopped and gazed at Mr. Penny rather absently; his thoughts were still more of heaven than earth.

‘Yes, sir; I've got somethin' as you ought to know,’ said Mr. Penny, planting his feet firmly on the ground, and seizing the lappet

of his coat with one hand while the other was left free for action. 'I don't want to tell no tales on nobody, but the truth's the truth, an' we've got to tell the truth and shame the devil. Not as there's any call to blame a brother overmuch for gettin' into a scrape. No indeed — then's the time to show yerself a Christian an' stan' by a friend ; for he's in a bad scrape an' no mistake ; this hofficer's bound to make his story good, an' if he's hurt as much as they say, there'll be no end o' trouble.'

Mr. Masters listened to this prelude with a threatening frown. His colleague was trying to gloss over a grievous fault, and must presently be rebuked. To attempt to stay Mr. Penny's flow of language when he had a story to tell would be about as much good as attempting to stay the Ald when close to its confluence with the Ullen, and, as Mr. Masters had no notion of getting a word in edge-ways, he bode his time. But the minister, careful of the Sabbath hours, broke in on the voluble deacon.

'Do I gather that some one in whom I

take an interest is in trouble?' he asked gravely.

'Take an interest!' exclaimed Mr. Penny. 'I should think you did. Why, he's like your own flesh an' blood; an' for the matter o' that, we all take an interest in him, both for his own sake, for he's as likely a young man as you'll find anywhere, an' because he's one as you set store by.'

At the words 'like your own flesh and blood,' the minister remembered a rumour he had once heard how Rachel's husband, on a long past convivial occasion, had been overtaken by drink. What if the tale were true, and if now there were some fresh fall! But Grace's fears flew straight to the mark.

'O father!' she gasped, putting her hand on his arm. 'Is it Matt?'

'Of course it's Matt,' said Mr. Penny, with a prodigious wink of both eyes at Grace. 'Mr. Hare I should say. Who did you think I was tellin' you about? Why, about him, to be sure. He has got into a pretty mess. 'Twas at the Dulford playhouse last night. I expect you didn't think as a candidate for

the ministry like him 'ud go to the play; but bless you, there's no bein' upsides wi' young men, their hearts is "deceitful above all things, an' desperately wicked." He was there right enough; I saw — ' here the story-teller stopped short. In his enjoyment of the surprise on Mr. Unwin's face, and the distress on Grace's, the speaker had nearly blurted out what he would fain conceal; but recovering his assurance, he stole a glance at Deacon Masters and quickly continued — 'I mean my brother-in-law saw him; that's Jem Millet as married my sister. He's in the Dulford ironworks, an' in the bond of iniquity too, poor man, though my sister wrestles for him continually in prayer. He thinks no harm of goin' to theatres or such places. Well, he was at the playhouse last night, in the gallery, an' he saw Mr. Matthew in the pit. 'Twas a fine play, he says, an' a fine actor as made folks cry ever so, especially Mr. Hare — he cried quite out loud, which isn't surprisin', for he's a very movable young gentleman. An' it's pleasant to see anybody as is easy moved by real misery,

but not by play-actin', as is only a vanity which —'

'This story is an impossible one,' said Mr. Unwin, ruthlessly interrupting the happy deacon. 'Matthew Hare has gone on a visit to Mr. Batt, with whom he remains to-day.'

'No, sir, that he doesn't. He remains in the round-house,' cried Mr. Penny, 'an' there he will remain till you or some friends bail him out. That's why I came home to-day, though travellin' on the Sabbath is against my conscience; but to let a lad like that stay in prison on the Lord's Day was more'n I could bear the thought of.'

'The round-house! What has Matthew Hare to do with the round-house?'

'A very fit place for him, if he's done what you say,' observed Mr. Masters sternly, while Grace did not speak, but shivered in the warm sunshine, and hung heavily upon her father's arm.

'That's just what I'm a-goin' to tell you, sir, if you'll hear the story out. Well, when the play was over, this actor—he's a good actor, everybody goes to see him—he talked

to Mr. Hare for a long time; I couldn't hear—I mean my brother-in-law couldn't hear what 'twas about. He was up the gallery stairs, an' couldn't get down for the people below. But Anthony Carew was standin' close by—you know him; he's Squire Carew's second son, the hofficer as is just home from Ireland, a slashin' fellow too; so I s'pose he got jealous because Kean didn't speak to him, for he tried to push Mr. Hare aside, an' they got to words—folks did say he called him a Ranter's son—anyhow from words to blows isn't a long way when young sparks gets their blood up, an' presently Mr. Hare couldn't stand Carew's insults any longer, so he hit out an' then there was a fine fight. They're about as tall as one another, but Carew's the older an' the firmer set, an' ought to know a deal more about fighting than ours; but 'twas easy to see he'd took a drop too much, for he wasn't steady like, so ours laid into him well, an' soon knocked the breath out of his body. Ah, 'tis a sad pity when men let their angry passions rise.' Mr. Penny's quotation from Dr. Watts came

oddly enough on his description of the fight. He knew that his tongue was apt to sound a worldly note, and tried hard to soften its effect, but with questionable success, since the texts and religious reflections with which he sought to tone down his talk heightened rather than modified its original character. 'So you see,' continued he, in a voice half triumphant half deprecating, 'the man o' peace floored the soldier. But some frightened woman run out to call the constables; so they come an' seized him just as he was poundin' away at t'other; but his friends carried him off to his inn quite helpless: an' they do say, if he's inclined to have the law, Mr. Hare'll be in a pretty fix, for if he should die, 'twould be nothin' less than manslaughter.'

'Your story is utterly incredible,' said the minister, as Mr. Penny's voice sank a little on the ugly word manslaughter. 'I am convinced that my ward would neither go to a theatre nor fight a drunken officer.'

'But I'm sure he was there; I — I' — Mr.

Penny was on the point of saying 'I saw him myself,' but he hesitated to sacrifice his character for consistent living, even to prove the truth of his story.

'Your brother-in-law has taken some other youth for Matthew Hare,' said the minister decidedly. 'He is probably not well acquainted with him.'

'He knows him as well as I do,' asserted Mr. Penny, 'an' he says he saw him at the play o' Thursday night.'

'Now I am quite convinced that he is mistaken in the man,' said the minister joyfully. 'On Thursday night Matthew Hare was in bed with a sick headache.'

'Now look here,' said Mr. Masters slowly, 'I was in Dulford Thursday afternoon, an' came drivin' past the playhouse on my way home, an' saw the poor deluded people standin' outside, waitin' for the door to open. If he'd been anywhere about he 'ud not have escaped my eye. So I don't believe that part o' the story neither.'

Thus decidedly spoke Mr. Masters. But Grace thought suddenly of the locked door,

the midnight entrance, and her mind was filled with fear.

‘Well, I don’t myself know about Thursday,’ admitted Mr. Penny regretfully; ‘but last night I feel sure he was there.’

‘If the story is true, and Mr. Carew is hurt, his friends will certainly know. We must send up to Deercourt and inquire,’ said Grace, with a decision that sounded odd from a girl accustomed to take her cue from men. Love, however, can make the most timid creature bold. ‘Or, as Deercourt is so far from the village, we might first inquire at the Rectory; Mr. Carew is so much there. Besides, Dr. Beauchamp will have seen the squire at church this morning.’

‘You are right, my dear,’ said Mr. Unwin, glad to find any way of testing the truth of this improbable story. ‘I will go to the Rectory at once.’

CHAPTER IX

AT THE RECTORY

THE Rectory is the next house to the minister's, but it lies so far back from the street, and is so embosomed in trees, as to be hardly visible from the village. A carriage-drive, overhung with boughs and bordered with shrubs, leads to it, and here Mr. Unwin intruded for the first time in his life.

The house stands on a slope of sunny lawn, and as the minister reached the porch he saw the rector at a little distance, tenderly regarding a fine Judas-tree in full bloom. This was indeed a brilliant object, shining out from amongst the fast-fading lilacs and laburnums like a soldier amongst civilians. So lost was the tree worshipper in contemplation that he did not notice his visitor until he heard steps close beside him, when, with a look of surprise

that no breeding could suppress, he turned, and made a ceremonious bow.

‘I must apologise for intruding, sir, and especially on the Sabbath-day,’ said Mr. Unwin, with an equally courteous salute, ‘but I have to confer with you on a very important matter.’

‘Pleased to see you, pleased to see you,’ returned Dr. Beauchamp, in his quick way. ‘And as to Sabbath-day, there couldn’t be a better time for the two — ha, ha! — shepherds to meet and confer about their flock, for I suppose it is about some sheep or other you wish to speak. But before any pastoral discussion you must look at my trees. I always take a turn round when I come out of church. After being shut up near upon two hours I want some refreshment, and a stroll among my trees is the best I can desire. Now let us go down the sunny side of the shrubbery.’ With this the rector turned sharply into a gravel path which led between the shrubbery and the paddock, and Mr. Unwin, sadly recognising that he was for the second time a talker’s victim, meekly accompanied him.

‘See what a fine border the evergreens

make to the taller trees. There is everything here old Evelyn judges necessary to create

Eternal spring, and summer all the year.

Ah, you are a scholar, Mr. Unwin, you know the original. But beside the evergreens here are flowering shrubs of which old John never dreamed. Now flowers — mere flowers — are only women's toys, but flowering trees are nobler things altogether, and give a pleasant diversity to their more sombre companions.'

'They do indeed,' responded Mr. Unwin. 'I have ever loved flowering trees, and especially such as are sweet scented. But, sir, I am engrossing your time and my own. I must proceed to the cause of my visit.'

'Presently, Mr. Unwin, presently; there can be no hurry. Come now, look at this chestnut; he has glorious flowers of his own, old John says, and I agree with him, as I do in his opinion of the sycamore, which is, that this tree should be banished from our gardens, because the leaves fall early, and make a sort of mucilage, putrefying with the first frost. So, in spite of its fine appearance and beautiful

shade, I cut down a large sycamore which stood just here. But it went to my heart, Mr. Unwin, it went to my heart. To cut down a tree is to deprive the world of what you may never be able to give it back. I would really as soon cut down a man as a tree. Very likely the former would be less loss to the world. Ha, ha, Mr. Unwin, you are shocked; you do not set much store by trees.'

'I set store by all the beautiful works of God,' said Mr. Unwin, more quickly than he was wont, 'but I cannot put a tree on a level with an immortal soul; and it is of one—'

'Certainly not, certainly not,' interrupted the rector. 'But now you really must come and see the best work of my life—an unselfish work, Mr. Unwin.'

So saying, the little man trotted off by a tempting path in the direction of the church, and Mr. Unwin followed him.

Dr. Beauchamp had plenty of curiosity, and, in an ordinary way, would have been eager to know the cause of the minister's visit, but to-day he had given reins to his hobby, and it cantered away with him. His solitary

breakfast eaten, he had betaken himself to the *Sylva*, for, by some mischance, the *Dulford Mercury*, which appeared on Saturday, and generally furnished his Sunday morning's reading, had not been delivered at the Rectory. He therefore solaced himself with Evelyn until church-time, and then took the book with him into the vestry, as he was accustomed to take the newspaper. No wonder, then, that certain passages of the beloved volume haunted him during service, and that, when he returned to his domain, which showed on all sides illustrations of his morning's reading, he should be absorbed in admiration of these.

‘There!’ he said triumphantly, as he reached the private gate opening on the churchyard, and pointing to a promising holly hedge which divided the sacred precinct from his own grounds; ‘see what I have planted for the benefit of the world when I am gone. A holly hedge—and that holly hedge, Mr. Unwin, will one day be as glorious and refreshing an object as any under the sun. When I look at it I feel I have not lived in vain,’ and the good

man regarded his work as admiringly as any architectural parson of to-day regards the fair church he has builded, or any musical parson his white-robed choir.

Mr. Unwin looked too, a great wonder in his mind. To this man had been committed the charge of all the souls in Aldbourne, and his entire care was for a holly hedge.

‘Ah, sir,’ he said courteously; ‘a holly hedge makes a fine fence, but what we need is a wall to keep the wolf from the fold. And now I must beg your kind attention to my errand. Will you first of all please tell me if you have heard any untoward news of young Mr. Carew — the gentleman who serves in the army?’

‘Of Tony Carew!’ cried the parson, in equal surprise and alarm. ‘No; he is well, and high-spirited as ever. He was here yesterday morning. Why do you ask me such a question?’

‘A strange and painful report has reached me,’ returned Mr. Unwin. ‘It says that young Mr. Carew and my ward, Matthew Hare, who certainly is staying in Dulford, had

last evening a quarrel and fight in the theatre there; that Mr. Carew was carried to his inn sadly injured, while Matthew Hare was seized by the constables and locked up.'

'Ha, ha, ha,' laughed Dr. Beauchamp, his face growing crimson with scorn. 'What! one of the finest young men in the army worsted by a slip of a lad like yours — a fine lad, too, but neither a boxer nor a fencer I should say. Why, my good sir, the tale carries a lie on the very face of it. Besides, the Carews were at church this morning, Mrs. Carew as handsome and serene as ever; so there's no bad news of Tony, you may be sure, for he's the apple of her eye, Mr. Unwin, the apple of her eye. But come, from whom did you hear this absurd story?'

'From Mr. Penny.'

'Exactly. I thought it had come from some prating fool, and so it has—from the biggest liar in the parish,' cried the parson hotly. 'You must excuse me, Mr. Unwin, if I call one of your flock by such a hard name, but indeed he merits it. Now this story may have a modicum of truth in it, for Tony cer-

tainly went into Dulford yesterday, intending to be present at the performance of *King Lear*, and it is possible that your ward and he may have met at the theatre, and there may have been a little sparring between them. Tony is fiery and on his mettle—I don't find fault with him on that account; a quick spirit is becoming in a young soldier—but, as I was saying, the quarrel was probably a mere nothing, and as to Tony being injured by your—'

'But, sir,' cried Mr. Unwin, moved to interruption by his grievous perplexity, 'it is impossible that Matthew Hare can have gone to the theatre.'

'Impossible? I should have thought it was just what he would like. A fine forward lad he is. He told me he had as good a right in Thorndon Wood as I. Ha, ha!'

'God forbid that he should enter a theatre!'

ejaculated Mr. Unwin fervently. 'For if he has done so, he has not only broken a rule of our body, but has practised a cruel deceit.'

'Come, Mr. Unwin,' remonstrated the rector, 'you must not be hard on the lad. You Non-conformists are too strait with your boys and

girls. Why, why! Young blood will bubble up now and then, in spite of all your cooling regimen. Indeed, sir, I am not sure but that you make it boil by the very measures that you take to chill it. And, after all, where is the harm in going to see a fine actor?’

‘Sir, one of your own clergy—I refer to the learned Jeremy Collier—drew up such an indictment of the English stage as might well cause all thinking persons to condemn its representations; and another clergyman—the saintly William Law—has thus written—“The playhouse is as certainly the house of the devil as the church is the house of God.”’

‘Well, well; things were bad in Collier’s time, and in Law’s not much better. Congreve’s and Wycherly’s plays were the fashion; loose morality—very loose. I have heard them myself—not that they did me any harm.’ Here the rector’s lips took a decorous pucker. ‘But the fashion has changed, and this Kean plays Shakspeare. Now, surely you, as a man of reading, will admit that Shakspeare has some fine things.’

Dr. Beauchamp must needs speak as the

world was beginning to speak, though, in truth, he cared little for the Shaksperian drama, since, like the late monarch, he had a great leaning to romantic comedy, and preferred *The Rivals* to any other play.

‘I admit it,’ returned the minister, sorely tried between scholarly candour and theological restraint. ‘Shakspeare’s plays abound with noble thoughts, set in perfect words ; but, on the other hand, there is so much in them the Christian must eschew, that I should not commend them to my ward as reading, still less should I permit him to be present at their representation.’

‘Ah, Mr. Unwin, Mr. Unwin,’ cried the parson, shaking his head, ‘you may try to turn men and women into angels, but you’ll only make them hypocrites. However, we shall not agree on this subject. Still, if you are a wise man, you’ll take my advice—you will probably drive into Dulford this afternoon and hunt out your ward—don’t be hard on him supposing he has so far transgressed as to go to the theatre.’

‘I could not be hard on him, whatever he

has done,' said Mr. Unwin. 'And with respect to seeking him out, it is what I purpose to do, since you can throw no light on Mr. Penny's story. I will therefore see about it forthwith, and will bid you good morning, sir, with many thanks for your courtesy.'

'Come, come, there can be no hurry, and you will do me a favour if you will stay and take lunch with me.'

But Mr. Unwin, gratified as he was by the invitation, was too bent on immediate action to linger, so the parson accompanied his visitor down the carriage drive, and bade him 'good morning' at the gate.

Perhaps, dear reader, you are shocked at Dr. Beauchamp's unclerical ways and sentiments, and are ready to compare him with your pet clergyman, greatly to his disadvantage. But the Aldbourne folk, except such as were bitten with Methodism, were very well satisfied with a parson who lived like one of themselves, whom they could understand and who understood them; and, after all, they were not so much in the wrong as, at first sight, may appear. Dr. Beauchamp had, it is true, no

conception of the duties of a priest, but he took a daily interest in the well-being of his people, their crops, their cattle, their children. He gave little or nothing to beautify the church's structure, but his purse was ever open to the sick and needy. He did not trouble about having things ecclesiastical done decently and in order, but he troubled a good deal that his parishioners should lead decent lives. He had no Sunday School, but he saw that the Church Catechism was taught to the youngsters both of the Free and Dame Schools, and kept a sharp look-out as to the practice of its precepts, especially of those which inculcate obedience and respect to parents and betters. He certainly never preached a sermon on Apostolical Succession, or the Efficacy of the Sacraments, or the verbal inspiration of Scripture, but he had in his sermon-pile, which he went regularly through, some very incisive little homilies on a man's duties to his neighbour; and, in fine, Aldbourne under his care might compare favourably, both in manners and morals, with many a rural parish of to-day.

CHAPTER X

MATT'S RETURN

AVERSE as Mr. Unwin was to Sabbath travelling, and aware of the shock his people would sustain when they saw him drive through the village to-day, he did not falter in his intent. For the loan of a horse and cart he must look to a friend, and that friend must be Mr. Masters, for though the deacon would no doubt frown on the request, he would be very angry if it were made to another, and would probably end by complying with it.

Leaving the Rectory, Mr. Unwin retraced his steps to the corner of the street where stood the grocer's shop, and there, in the private door-way, he beheld the good man dusting his boots with a handkerchief.

‘What!’ ejaculated Mr. Masters, when the

minister had made known his errand ; ' drive into Dulford on the Sabbath-day ! '

' Brother,' returned Mr. Unwin, ' need I remind you of Christ's question to the Pharisees— " Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath-day ? " '

' Sir, you shall have the cart an' horse, and I'll drive you into Dulford myself,' said Mr. Masters, with surprising readiness. He was really touched by the Scriptural allusion, but he was yet more moved by the prospect of an opportunity, during the drive home, of speaking his mind to Matthew Hare. ' I hope as the young man'll profit by your goodness to him,' he continued, ' an' leave off all his light ways. But, sir, I must have a snack before I go, an' so must you ; there'll be plenty of time while I send my lad for the mare ; she's down in the mead, having a Sabbath snooze ; she's the knowin'est creature on the road, and not apt to let herself be caught easy. An', sir, don't you worry yourself about this evenin's sermon. I for one 'ud like to hear a sermon as wasn't so much studied. We're

told to take no thought what we shall speak, for it shall be given us in the same hour.'

'You forget that the admonition and promise you quote were addressed to the disciples in case they should be brought before the civil magistrate, and have no bearing on the minister's constant office of preaching to his flock.'

Mr. Masters slowly shook his head, as if he might have answered the argument had he chosen, but thought it best to reserve speech; and Mr. Unwin, glad to be spared further words, went quickly home.

Mr. Unwin had done two bold deeds. Though keenly sensitive to his anomalous position in clerical eyes, he had sought an interview with Dr. Beauchamp; and though shrinking from any war of words, he had asked an extraordinary favour of Mr. Masters. Yet at the door of his own parlour he paused, foreboding the reproof he would meet within. How often our nearest, if not our dearest, make all the dread of our lives.

As her husband entered, Mrs. Unwin lifted up a face whereon sat an air of martyr-like

resignation. To wait, hungry, before the food one is determined not to touch until a loiterer arrives, has never been found improving to the temper; and in Mrs. Unwin's case the trial was the greater because this delay caused all the needful household work to stand still.

'Well, William,' said the uneasy house-keeper, 'you've forgotten dinner, I should think, and on the Sabbath too, when it's so important to have everything to time. There's Kezia has her own meal to get, and to make things straight before she can clean herself and be off to Bible Class. Men somehow never do think—but, there, I should have supposed that your own stomach would have told you the time, especially after the praying and preaching you have done.'

'I am sorry to be late,' said the minister, 'but, as Grace has no doubt told you, a matter of more importance even than dinner demanded my attention.'

'Could Dr. Beauchamp tell you anything?' asked Grace, whose anxiety had ill endured delay.

‘No, my dear, he knew nothing, and as the squire’s family were at church this morning, he inferred that the story was greatly exaggerated, if not wholly false.’

‘Well, I wonder you should take any notice of it at all,’ said Mrs. Unwin, as, forgetting her own hunger, she carefully attended to her husband’s wants. ‘I don’t believe a word of it. Why, Mr. Penny said—so Grace tells me—that Matt was at the play three nights running, and how can that be true when he was in bed one night with a sick headache and up at Mr. Plowden’s the other? Mr. Penny’s too fond of—’ Perhaps remembering St. Augustine’s couplet, Mrs. Unwin here broke off, and asked anxiously—‘Was Dr. Beauchamp civil?’

‘He was more than civil, he was friendly. He invited me to the mid-day meal he calls lunch, and I would gladly have eaten with him, had I not decided to go at once to Dulford. Mr. Masters has kindly consented to drive me thither, that I may find out the rights of this strange tale.’

‘On the Sabbath! You’ll have everybody

up in arms,' cried his wife, much perturbed. Mrs. Unwin's belief in her husband was absolute, and she questioned his words and deeds, not because she doubted the wisdom of either, but because to her a grievance was a distinct form of pleasure. 'Not that they've any right to interfere with you,' she continued, 'giving a man of your learning and years such a miserable salary.'

'Hark! I hear the cart,' exclaimed Grace, as through the Sunday silence without came the sound of a quick trot with wheel accompaniment.

But surely the deacon's old mare and lumbering cart never went at so brisk a pace, and yet the sounds ceased opposite the house. Grace rose and peeped cautiously through the open hall door. If Mr. Masters saw her he would expect her to come forward and speak to him. Her cautious glance was, however, succeeded by a sudden rush to the door, for in the entry stood Matt.

'Ah! you are not hurt,' she cried, holding out her hand, while he, pale and reluctant, hesitated upon the threshold of his home.

‘No, I am not hurt,’ he replied, squeezing her fingers hard.

‘Hurt? No indeed,’ said a gentleman who had followed Matt to the door. ‘This is a fine fighting cock, and more likely to hurt another than to get hurt himself.’

Grace dropped the hand she held, and looked at the speaker. In her delight at seeing Matt she had not noticed his companion, but now she immediately recognised him as Mr. Anthony Carew.

The soldier, if not a handsome, was a personable young man, with a fair sun-burnt face, a fine figure, and an exceedingly self-assured manner. He was well-bred, healthy, and ignorant, according to the fashion of the English country gentleman, who lives in the open air and never reads. Though already known as one of the hardest drinkers in his regiment, and though in a state of semi-intoxication last night, Mr. Carew looked as fresh as a rose. But our forefathers could, with impunity, drink draughts which would inevitably send us out of the world, whereby we judge that, either these men were tougher than

we, or that they drank better liquor than ours.

‘Excuse me, Miss Unwin,’ continued Mr. Carew, with the dainty accent and in the drawling fashion peculiar to him, which together rendered him famous among the villagers for his ‘fine talk.’ ‘Excuse me, but I see you have heard the story of our little — ah — encounter last night. Well, mind you, this young fellow can hit out straight; he ought to be a soldier. Can’t you persuade your father to put him in the army?’

While Mr. Carew talked on, trying in his good-natured way to cover Matt’s confusion, the minister came out into the hall. Matt stepped quickly forward, and looked in his guardian’s face. At a glance he saw that Mr. Penny had been before him, and he stood dumb.

But a sterner judge than Mr. Unwin could scarcely have shown hardness to so evidently repentant a sinner as Matt. His face was pale, his eyes were heavy, his hair was out of curl, his whole bearing expressed remorse.

‘My boy,’ said the minister, his voice

trembling a little, 'I was just coming in search of you. Welcome back.'

Through the slow hours he had spent in the round-house, and during his rapid drive to Aldbourne, behind Mr. Carew's fast-stepping horse, Matt's one terror had been the thought of this meeting. O that he could avoid it in any way! But as Mr. Penny would most certainly have told the evening's history — and with embellishments — the only course for its hero was to return home, confess himself, and take humbly the rebuke he deserved.

'O sir,' he said, touched to the heart by the kind greeting which had waited no word from him, 'I have done wrong; I am sorry.'

'It is well,' replied the minister, laying a tender hand on the lad's shoulder, and holding him fast; then turning courteously to Mr. Carew, he asked, 'Are we indebted to this gentleman for bringing you home?'

'Yes, Mr. Unwin,' said the officer cheerily, as he came forward and shook hands. 'I slept in Dulford last night, and my first inquiries this morning were for my honourable antagonist here. I heard that he was

occupying a certain hermitage which we will not name. I went there, and found him fretting himself into fiddle-strings. But I soon managed to set him free—the name of Carew was enough. And I will get my father—a magistrate, mind you—to hush the matter up. Ah, Mrs. Unwin, I beg your pardon; I did not know you were so near. Are you quite well?’

If Mr. Carew thought it a sign of good breeding to show himself dictatorial towards men, he certainly behaved to women of all ranks with courtesy, and now spying Mrs. Unwin just within the parlour door, he interrupted himself to accost her.

‘I am very grateful to you, sir, for bringing this lad home,’ said the minister, when his well-pleased wife had responded to Mr. Carew’s greeting. ‘I was just on the point of starting to Dulford in search of him, since the painful story of his—’

‘Excuse me, Mr. Unwin,’ cried the soldier, ‘that’s just what I came to speak about. If either of us is to blame for last night’s fisticuffs, it is Anthony Carew, and not Matt

Hare. I took an involuntary movement of his for an insult. Mind you, Mr. Unwin, I am an officer and a — I would say I am quick to take offence; besides, I had just dined — you know what that means.'

If Mr. Unwin did know, it must assuredly have been by hearsay only; he, however, made no disclaimer of conviviality, but gravely invited Mr. Carew to enter the parlour.

'Not to-day, not to-day; I must hurry home in case my mother should have heard a word of this affair. If she has, she will be in a fine taking, for she never thinks I can look after myself. It is a way mothers have, Mrs. Unwin, ha, ha!' — and Mr. Carew smoothed his broad chest with entire self-satisfaction. 'But if you will allow me, I will call on my friend Matt in a day or two, and see if I can't persuade him and you that he ought to be a soldier.'

The whole family accompanied Mr. Carew to the door and watched him get up in his gig. Seated in it, he made a low bow to the ladies and drove off, leaving Grace a little flushed at the unwonted salute. Her

male acquaintances simply nodded to her as they did to one another, from which you may suppose that courtly manners had no place in Aldbourne, or at any rate only kept company with Grace's betters.

'The minister's daughter is positively pretty. Where were my eyes never to perceive it before?' said Mr. Carew to himself as he bowled along. 'And how she looked at that boy! I believe she's in love with him. Happy fellow! Ay, and he needn't have been so confoundedly afraid of the old Methodist. Why, he was as soft as a woman, ay, and softer; women can be hard enough when they choose. I wonder if he will listen to reason and put Matt Hare in the army. I shall tell him it is madness to think of making such a spirited young devil into a Methodist preacher. He would as soon knock his hearers down as look at 'em.'

Almost as Mr. Carew drove away from the minister's gate Mr. Masters, with his wide cart and stolid mare, came along the street. At sight of them Matt beat a hasty retreat upstairs to the solitude he longed for, while

Grace and her mother returned to the parlour. Mrs. Unwin was in a state of utter bewilderment — the charge against Matt, his arrival in company of the very man he was said to have fought, the delayed dinner, Kezia waiting idle in the kitchen — all these things combined to make a chaos in the good housewife's mind. Out of it one idea alone dawned clear — Sunday School began at half-past two. Grace would be late. Reminded of her duty, Grace made herself ready, and then stole out by the yard gate without glancing at Mr. Masters, whose loud voice she could hear addressing her father.

‘Then we an’ the mare are saved breakin’ the Sabbath,’ he said stiffly. In telling of Matt’s return, the minister’s relief from uncertainty had shone out too much like joy to please the stern deacon. ‘An’ you’ll have the time for studyin’ to-night’s sermon, as you think you ought ; ay, an’ time to inquire into Mr. Matt’s doin’s. You’ll excuse me, but I do hope you’ll be firm with him. He’s fallen into sin, there’s no doubt of that, an’ he should be rebuked sharply. Remember Paul’s

orders to Timothy — “Be instant in season, out of season ; reprove, rebuke, exhort.”’

‘You forget, brother,’ returned Mr. Unwin quickly, ‘that the whole point of that injunction lies in the concluding word — “with all long-suffering.”’

Muttering an inaudible reply, Mr. Masters led away his well-pleased mare, who, though ‘the knowin’est creature upon the road,’ had suffered herself to be captured with foolish ease, never suspecting anything so extraordinary as a Sabbath-day’s journey.

CHAPTER XI

A CONFESSION

GRACE found the school assembled in the chapel vestry, and went to her own class without seeming to notice the flutter her arrival caused among the teachers, male and female. Perhaps the latter were the more moved, for though Matt Hare showed but little appreciation of their charms, they were not equally indifferent to his.

Grace generally played the part of teacher to perfection, but this afternoon she made a very indifferent pedagogue. The best-behaved girl in the class repeated 'The spacious firmament on high' without a mistake, and gained no praise. The black sheep of the flock remarked audibly that she saw no good in 'ymns an' textes,' and got no rebuke. Grace's thoughts were away from the hot

vestry — where teachers and children suffered every Sunday in the summer a grilling almost equal to that of St. Lawrence — and up in her father's study. There, doubtless, Matt was now making his confession.

Notwithstanding her absorption, Grace was quite aware of the curious glances cast upon her. Matt's escapade had of course gone the round of the congregation, and everybody was longing to talk about it. Directly school was over she would be surrounded by ruthless questioners. The prospect was unbearable; the most undignified retreat would be better than such torture. At the last word of the concluding prayer, therefore, Grace slipped to the vestry door, and was down the aisle and out of the chapel in a twinkling, when, taking to her heels, regardless of sex or Sabbath, she ran through the wharf, as the less frequented way, and in a few minutes gained the welcome shelter of home.

Within the house was a great calm. Grace peeped into the parlour; it was empty. She went upstairs; the bedroom doors stood open, there was no creature in them. She stole

down again, and out into the dark school lobby. Now she could hear voices above; Matt's low and broken, her father's soft and soothing. Almost immediately the voices ceased, the study door opened, Matt's foot was on the stairs. The very sound of his quiet springless step told Grace his state of mind. Usually he ran up and down, two stairs at a time, as if his legs could not keep pace with his impatience. Catching sight of Grace he tried to smile, failed dismally, then came up to her and put his hand on her arm. She looked very pretty, standing there in her pale gray gown, her cheeks flushed by her run, her eyes brimful of tenderness. Matt's heart went out to her, not so much to the prettiness as to the tenderness. He was in such need of sympathy that, had Mrs. Unwin stood there with a motherly expression on her face, he would probably have given her the kiss he now gave her daughter. But the effect on each would have been different. As it was, no sooner did his lips touch Grace's soft cheek than he was conscious of a strange thrill, while she had such a

rush of feeling that, for a minute, she was like to faint.

‘Let us go into the garden,’ said Matt, recovering himself, ‘and I will tell you everything.’

So they two went up the long gravel walk to the old summer-house, which stood under the shade of a laburnum. A week ago this tree had been the pride of the garden, but now its flowers were scattered on the ground, making a yellow carpet.

‘Your father has been good to me,’ said Matt, as they sat down on the shaky seat.

‘Did you tell him everything?’ asked Grace.

‘Everything,’ he returned, and then sat silent, as if in remorseful thought.

Grace had plenty of patience, and would have waited her companion’s pleasure, but time was going fast, the call to tea would soon come, and afterwards was the chapel service.

‘Matt,’ she said softly, ‘it is long past four o’clock.’

‘Is it?’ said Matt, lifting his heavy eyes to Grace with a sickly smile. ‘Then I will

get on with my story. Shall I begin at the beginning?’

‘When was the beginning? Was it last Thursday?’

At the remembrance of Grace’s midnight burglar Matt burst into an involuntary laugh, but it soon ended in a sigh.

‘The beginning was years ago,’ he said; ‘when I was quite a child. At the top of our house we had a garret, where were piled up heaps of old books — sermons, novels, plays. I always loved reading, and I used to hunt among these. Presently I chanced on the plays. They delighted me. I read them over and over again, until I got many of them by heart. I can repeat some of them now: *Fazio*, for instance, and *Bertram*. At home I never heard a word about actors or acting, but when I went to school I found a boy there who had often been to the play. He talked to me of Shakspeare — until then I had supposed Shakspeare to be an epic poet, for I knew him only by extracts in school-books — but I remembered that, in my father’s library, were volumes marked with his name. I con-

trived to get these, and I believed that I and the boy, Bob Garnett, went mad over them. At every possible moment we two acted together, though often our scenes were mere dialogue, as we were afraid to gesticulate, lest we should be found out. But once, I remember, we had the schoolroom to ourselves, and thought it a fine opportunity to practice the fencing scene in *Richard III*. We pulled the heads of two mops off, and used the sticks for swords. We were just in full swing when my adversary had the bad luck to poke his sword through the window — the usher came running in, and there was a fine row. And another time — But I must not tell school stories, or I shall never end. We will go on to when I came here.'

'Here was nothing to keep such thoughts in your mind.'

'No indeed. Here are neither heroes nor villains, kings nor clowns, but only everyday folks, who weary you to death — I mean, Mr. Penny and such like. No, Grace; as you say, I found nothing here to feed my passion, and, in fact, though I still liked to read plays, I

soon nearly agreed with your father in his view of the stage. Not that I could ever go so far as he does, and say that there is nothing noble in it, for, Grace, he hasn't seen Edmund Kean, and I have.' Here Matt paused, his eyes glowing with such a light as showed the fire within to be by no means extinguished; and when he continued, his voice was oddly moved. 'Last autumn the old craze was brought back to my mind in a strange way. You know I went to Richmond, to stay with my Uncle Morris. While I was there, a company of actors came down to the theatre to perform *Bertram*. A play-bill was sent to my uncle. On it was the name of my old school-fellow, Bob Garnett, opposite the title part. I had no notion that he had gone on the stage, and —'

'What! Is he an actor?' cried Grace, in horror.

'Yes, an actor; and the desire to see him act was too strong for me. I accompanied my cousins to the theatre.'

'O Matt, what a pity!'

'It was a pity indeed, for if I had not gone

then I shouldn't have cared so overwhelmingly to go again. I wish — I wish — and yet —' Puzzled by contending feelings, Matt hesitated, rubbed his eyes, shook his head, and resumed, in a determined way — 'Well, Grace, my uncle invited Bob to his house. Of course the young actor talked of nothing but his calling, and I liked to hear him. He gave me a number of plays, and has since written to me occasionally. It was he who sent me notice of the three performances in Dulford last week. "You are so near," he wrote, "you will certainly go." And go I did, to all three.'

'But you were sick on Thursday; I can't think how you went to Dulford.'

'Sick with longing,' he said impulsively, 'so I shammed sick in reality. I chalked my face and darkened my eyes, and your dear, simple father never found me out. O I can't talk about it. I hate myself every time I think of him.' Here Matt choked, and continued with difficulty — 'He has forgiven me — quite forgiven me — the deceit and the play-going also. Grace, will you forgive me too?'

'I have nothing to forgive,' she said, meet-

ing his pleading look with one of softest sympathy.

‘O yes you have. I ought to have confided in you, my most faithful friend. Ah, Grace, if I had, I shouldn’t now be in this trouble. However, I have got a lesson for always, and am determined never to touch a play-book nor go near a theatre again. And I mean to burn all. But look, there is Kezia, beckoning us to come in to tea.’

CHAPTER XII

MATT FACES THE CONGREGATION

TEA proved to be a very silent meal. Mr. Unwin was lost in meditation, Matt and Grace did not care to utter a word, while Mrs. Unwin, who had arrived at a full knowledge of Matt's misdoings, shed dribbling tears, and sniffed plaintively. Ah, what a pity that the boy had transgressed thus, for what would people say? Mrs. Unwin's world was small, but so are our worlds, dear reader. We live surrounded by the immensities, yet we only see the road between our own house and the chapel or church, as the case may be; 'we are made a spectacle unto angels,' yet we are principally concerned as to what our special Mrs. Grundy may say of us. The minister's wife, indeed, had some reason for disquiet, since Mrs. Grundy's ill word would mean less

money at the quarterly collections—a possibility not to be dreamed of with resignation.

The sight of her mother's tears made Grace feel as guilty as if she herself had wrought all the wrong, but it stirred up Matt's bile. He would a thousand times rather she had scolded him vigorously than have wept at him. He decided, with some scorn, that a mixture of tea and tears must be appetising, for Mrs. Unwin's weeping did not spoil her meal. Like the Psalmist, she 'ate the bread of tears, and had plenteousness of tears to drink.'

The young folks would have been glad enough when tea came to an end, but beneath this deep was another, deeper still—the chapel service. With a brave outside and a shrinking heart, Matt anticipated the ordeal, while Grace was quite as agitated as he, and, moreover, did not hide her tremors so well. According to custom, the minister went to chapel early, leaving his household to follow. Now Mrs. Unwin always found it difficult to tear herself from home, even for religious worship; this evening, therefore, the three were nearly late, entering the little building just as Mr.

Masters stood up to announce the opening hymn. Every head turned towards the expected trio, and on nearly every countenance sat reprehension. Mr. Masters, whose desk was under the pulpit and opposite the door, stopped short, book in hand, and stared at each reprovingly, as who should say, 'Bad, worse, worst.' But neither of the three noticed him. Mrs. Unwin crept up the aisle with an apologetic air, and Grace glided after her, while Matt stalked behind, his head well up, his face flushed, his eyes turned haughtily from the eyes seeking his, and fixed on the minister's pew, the partition of which was a foot or so higher than that of any other. They reached the friendly shelter, and, sinking on the seat, they crouched into the curious posture approved by Nonconformity as devotional. When they unbent themselves Grace put out her hand to Matt, as if to assure him that she, at least, would stand beside him, and he in return warmly grasped the tender fingers. Then they rose to sing the hymn, pleased to think that the congregation in general could only contemplate

the backs of their heads. Matt had formerly sat by Mrs. Unwin, sideways to the people, but the view of men and women singing was too great a temptation to him, since he felt impelled to mimic the various expressions, mostly dolorous, induced by the making of melody.

Mr. Masters could only see Matt's face by turning himself quite round, and then he only beheld it in profile, but the congregation noted the deacon's stern glances, and knew that a pretty rod was in pickle for Master Matt.

The privilege of selecting the hymn before the sermon was reserved by Mr. Unwin, the other hymns were left to the deacon. To-night he had given out a hymn of the fire-and-brimstone type, 'Stop, poor Sinner,' and, as his knowledge of harmony was nil, he sang the tune in a blatant tenor voice, gazing the while, with his most uncompromising expression, at the offending youth.

Once again I charge you, stop;
For, unless you warning take,
Ere you are aware, you drop
Into the burning lake.

Matt felt a strong inclination to step out and strike the noisy singer. But hymns—even the lengthy doggerel dear to church folks of to-day—come to an end with patience, much more the brief hymns of the past; and the sound of Mr. Unwin's voice, raised in prayer, came sweetly on Matt's irritated ears. The people listened intently to both prayer and sermon. Surely the minister would not throw away such an opportunity of speaking plainly upon the sin of theatre-going. But they listened in vain. Mr. Unwin's prayer was for the charity that hopeth all things, and his sermon only an enlarging upon—we had almost said an enfeebling of—St. Paul's splendid eulogium of the same virtue.

'Brother,' he said, as, after the sermon, Mr. Masters followed him into the vestry, 'it strikes me that we have sung "Stop, poor Sinner," rather frequently of late. Suppose we now let it rest.'

'I don't know what you've got to find fault with in it,' said Mr. Masters rudely. He would not hide from the minister that he was indignant with him for letting Matt go scot

free. 'You told me yourself as 'twas the work of a minister of the Establishment, an' that's recommendation enough for some.'

'Ministers of the Establishment are not necessarily poets,' said Mr. Unwin drily.

'Poets! Who's talkin' about poets?' said Mr. Masters, and then proceeded with unconscious acumen — 'Hymns have got nothin' to do with poetry. But, there, I don't choose to waste time talkin' about such stuff as poetry. I'm set to know why you didn't speak a word in season to the backslider.'

'You forget that Matthew Hare lives in my house,' said Mr. Unwin mildly, though annoyed at the deacon's attack. 'I have many opportunities of speaking a word in season.'

'It ought to be spoken before the Church,' retorted Mr. Masters. 'All the members know of his fault, an' it's my opinion as he should be rebuked before 'em all.'

'But it is only in case of a hardened continuance in evil-doing that we are enjoined to tell it unto the Church.'

'Then do you mean to tell me as you won't

call a meetin' o' Church members, an' lay the matter before 'em?'

'Mr. Masters,' said the minister, with a dignity that impressed even the self-assertive deacon, 'you must suffer me to deal with my ward as I think best. He is not insensible to his fault, but he is in a wavering state, and may easily be driven to make shipwreck altogether. Harshness, or even argument, would probably ruin him; gentleness may win him, for kindness has more power over souls, not only then severity, but then the very best reasoning. And I firmly believe that at the tribunal of the God whose name is Love, it will be easier to give account for having been too gentle than for having been too severe.'

While the minister thus fought Matt's battle with the chapel censor the offending youth and Grace had reached home.

'We have escaped them all,' said Grace, as they entered the garden gate.

The words had scarcely left her lips when, from behind a bay-tree, stepped Mr. Penny, and in a hesitating fashion came up to the pair.

‘I’ve got something to say to Mr. Matt,’ he ventured uneasily. ‘I won’t keep him long, miss.’

Grace felt too vexed with the intruder to answer him, and went quickly into the house.

‘What is it, Mr. Penny?’ asked Matt stiffly. ‘Have you come to apologise for the lies you have told about me?’

There was really little need to put the question. Every line of Mr. Penny’s face and figure was apologetic, and most of all apologetic was his silence. The man so eager to speak had changed into the man repentant for having spoken.

‘Yes, sir, I’ve come to apologise,’ said Mr. Penny humbly. ‘I’m sorry enough I said a word about you, an’ I’m sure I’m thankful from my heart as you haven’t said nothin’ about me. I could tell, the moment I set eyes on the minister, as you’d held your tongue; an’, sir, if ’t isn’t askin’ too much, will you — will you —’

‘Keep my tongue held for the future,’ cried Matt, as the speaker hesitated. ‘O uncon-

scionable man! After your stories about me you expect me to treat you tenderly.'

'Well, you see, sir, we should return good for evil,' said Mr. Penny, with a twinkle of his eye; 'and if you consider, you'll find as the story bein' worse than the reality was a good thing for you, because, as I expect, the minister was so glad at findin' things better than he'd heard, that he forgave you in a minute.'

'There may be something in your view of the case,' returned Matt, with a half smile. 'But look here, Mr. Penny, before I promise to keep your secret, tell me honestly, did you enjoy the play last night?'

Mr. Penny gave his questioner a shrewd glance, and saw that he might answer truly.

'Enjoy it! I should think I did,' he said, sucking in his breath. 'I always loved a movin' actor in a movin' piece; an' I believe there's no such actor in the world as Kean, nor no such play as *Lear*. Why, I cried pretty near as much as you.'

'I will keep your secret,' said Matt, his face all aglow, and, giving Mr. Penny a

heartly shake of the hand, he went off after Grace.

His conversation with Deacon Masters ended, the minister went home, sadly dwelling on Matt's fall and its consequences. The lad must be defended from any inquisition on the part of the congregation, lest the shame and sorrow he now felt should be turned to anger and defiance. Mr. Unwin sighed as he recognised what manner of spirit Matt was of, and yet so ardent a nature, if only taking the right course, might act as an inspiration to many, and be a power in the Church. Well then, the first thing was to guard him from attack, not only abroad but at home. Here again the minister sighed. However patiently he bore with his wife's tongue, he could not be ignorant of its effect on others, especially on Matt; and now, unless he could by tactful reasoning win her to silence, how often would the lad's delinquencies rise in judgment against him! Not that Mrs. Unwin would for a moment believe Matt to be so very bad — indeed, to any outsider she would have vouched for his real goodness with unstinted fervour, but in

the bosom of her family she could not help dwelling on the faults of its youthful or serving members, and kept quite an astonishing register of their old sins. Involuntarily Mr. Unwin thought of the continual dropping that weareth away stones, and winced as he felt how unlike a stone was the young heart he desired to shield. But our dread of an impending disagreeable is often greater than needs be, as the minister presently found, for no sooner had he touched upon the deacon's suggestion that Matt should be brought up before the Church than all Mrs. Unwin's spirit was aroused. She could suffer impertinences from the members of her husband's flock so long as these affected only herself, but as the hen, which runs away or crouches when herself attacked, will turn and face any foe in defence of her brood, so Mrs. Unwin turned to defend Matt.

‘Well, I never heard such a thing,’ she cried. ‘I should like to know who's got the right to say a word to the boy but you. His father left him to you, not to Mr. Masters, so don't you let him nor anybody interfere.’

We're not Wesleyans, to have every fault of our members paraded before the whole congregation.'

'Certainly we have no such custom,' said the minister, 'and it is well, since but too often an offender tells that which had not only better remain unspoken, but better never be even remembered.'

'Well, I wonder at Mr. Masters wanting you to copy the Wesleyans when he thinks they are all wrong. But I hope, William, you'll be firm. If you have a fault it is that you are too easily put upon.'

'You know, my dear,' said Mr. Unwin, with a smile, 'that a minister should not strive. But this matter I shall certainly manage without the assistance of my congregation. And now, as regards our own treatment of Matt—I am sure he is both sorry for and ashamed of his wrong-doing, therefore we have no need to urge contrition upon him.'

'Yes, I believe he is sorry, for he took a mere nothing at tea—and he such a lad for his meals. He looked very down in the

sermon, too. I really think he feels convinced of sin.'

'He does, I am sure; so this being the case, and taking besides into consideration the peculiarity of his disposition, I judge'— Here Mr. Unwin hesitated a moment, but the next he went on bravely— 'I judge that it will be well for his perfect repentance if we all abstain from casting up this fall against him.'

'That's true,' asserted the good wife heartily; 'and I shall tell Grace never to worry him about it. As to you and me, we're not likely to make such a mistake.'

This conversation bred so careful and tender a spirit in Mrs. Unwin that at supper no word did she speak of Matt's sin, but seemed only concerned to show kindness to the sinner; and he, already subdued by the minister's forgiveness, was by this unaccountable reticence brought to a yet more entire self-condemnation, and fell into a very promising melancholy, which lasted several days.

CHAPTER XIII

AN AUTO-DA-FÉ

OUT of Matt's bitter sorrow for his misdoings sprang an heroic resolve. He would burn his play-books. Nobody had suspected the existence of such things, because he had kept them under lock and key, and had read them only in solitude. Many an hour had he sat up conning plays instead of lying down to sleep, but always undiscovered. Doubtless Mrs. Unwin would soon have found him out had he not been crafty enough to buy candles for this secret use, and so spare those of the household.

His determination taken, he, on Wednesday afternoon, manfully set himself to carry it out. The half-holiday gave him plenty of time to make his preparations, and he was busily employed in the garden from the end of

dinner until four o'clock, at which hour he came, with a half-gloomy, half-important manner, to invite Mrs. Unwin and Grace to see the lighting of the bonfire.

Both women were eager for the sight, both looking on it, not only as a burning of the accursed thing, but as a sign and seal of Matt's renunciation of worldly amusements. Mrs. Unwin was certainly amazed to find Matt in possession of so large a stock of play-books, but the knowledge of their quick coming destruction deadened her horror. So she and Grace, simple souls, accepted the burnt-offering in good faith, and did not perceive that Matt was finding a species of satisfaction in being chief and only actor in quite a little tragedy.

The weather was still fair; the sun shone brightly; here and there a tiny white cloud sailed over the blue; the wind was a soft south. It was a day for young hearts to rejoice in their youth and the youth of the summer, and not to be preparing sacrifices.

Leading the way, Matt stalked with a solemn stride to the top of the garden, where

he had piled up a fine heap of dry rubbish and wood, with a wisp of straw on the side towards the sun. Seating the pair of spectators in the arbour, he took from thence a huge bundle of pamphlets and some bound volumes, and began to put these one by one on the funeral pyre, opening each as he did so. They would set on fire more easily thus, he said, but in reality he wanted to snatch a last look at the fascinating pages.

‘What do we begin with?’ he cried, seizing a pamphlet at random. ‘*Cato*. Only think, Grace, this play was written by the man who composed your favourite hymn—“The Lord my Pasture shall prepare.” Ah well, the best may err. What is this? *The Man of the World*. Sir Pertinax, your “booing” is over. And here are *The Road to Ruin* and a dozen more less known to fame. O dear! must I burn this one? *Fazio*. Written by a parson, ma’am. Think of that.’ Opening the once popular tragedy, Matt chanced on the repentant husband’s last words, and rolled them out with immense passion—

Farewell, farewell, farewell.

She does not feel, she does not feel! Thank Heaven!
She does not feel her Fazio's last last kiss —
One other! cold as stone — sweet, sweet as roses.

Then, as if ashamed of his emotion, he laid the other books silently on the pile, until he came to the bound volumes.

‘Shakspeare must crown the whole,’ he said resolutely.

‘O Matt!’ exclaimed Grace, in admiration of the sublime sacrifice, ‘will you burn Shakspeare?’

‘Yes, and quick, or perhaps—’ he stopped, and felt in his pocket.

‘Here is the tinder-box,’ said Grace eagerly.

‘No base flint and steel shall light the bonfire which is to consume genius. The sun alone is worthy to kindle the flame,’ cried Matt, dashing the box aside; and taking a piece of burning-glass from his pocket he placed it over the wisp of straw. We have all read of burning-glasses which fused silver, gold, and even precious stones, but who ever heard of one being used to consume wit and

pathos, comedy and tragedy ? The sun probably found his rays oddly employed, nevertheless he was equal to the occasion ; in a few moments he set fire to the straw, then the rubbish caught, the dry wood followed, and soon the pamphlets were ablaze.

Up to this point Matt had not faltered, but at sight of the cherished pages curling into black tinder a sudden spasm shook him. He seized a stick, as if even now he would save his long-hoarded treasures from the flames ; then a grim smile came on his face, and he stirred the fire to a fiercer blaze. It might burn the books, it could not sear the memory that held their contents.

An exclamation from Mrs. Unwin interrupted his thoughts.

‘ Grace, who are those gentlemen with your father ? I do declare it’s Dr. Beauchamp and Mr. Carew. What can they have come for ? I’m glad I’ve a clean cap on.’ So saying, the surprised woman rose in some trepidation to greet her visitors, who came slowly up the garden. Dr. Beauchamp’s stout little legs showed off well to-day in their black silk

stockings—in summer he always relinquished his gaiters, unless at work amongst his trees—and his rubicund face shone forth beside Mr. Unwin's pale one as Mars beside Saturn. Mr. Carew bore even a braver aspect than usual. He had been walking over the manor with his father, inspecting the crops, and the glow of exercise was yet on his cheeks.

Both parson and soldier paid their respects to the ladies like men of breeding, the latter following up his greeting with a well-turned compliment to Grace, but Dr. Beauchamp's attention was immediately taken by Matt, who stood motionless beside his burnt-offering, his face flushed, his eyes glowing with a sullen light.

‘What are you about, Mr. Matt?’ asked the rector, in his sharpest tones. ‘Making a bonfire in May—and with books?’

‘I am burning my play-books,’ returned Matt gloomily, giving a stir to the crowning volumes, whose thick covers still resisted the flames. ‘But Shakspeare is tough, and won't burn.’

‘What! You dare to burn Shakspeare,’

cried the parson, and taking the stick from Matt's hands, he poked the topmost book quite out of the fire. Though he seldom disturbed the works of the divine poet from their place in his library, none the less this burning appeared to him a species of sacrilege, and almost involuntarily he continued, 'Why, you young dog, you will burn the Bible next.'

A miserable doubt struck Matt's heart at the words — would the burning of the Scriptures cost him as much pain as did this? He thrust the doubt away.

'I am burning Shakspeare,' he said resolutely, and therewith he kicked back the nearly rescued book into the flames — 'because there is more temptation in his pages than in the pages of all the rest of the play-books in the world.'

'Still, there was no need of an *auto-da-fé*,' said Mr. Unwin gently. 'You might have confided the books to me, until such time as you could have possessed them without danger.'

'Well, I don't understand our friend Matt

at all,' said Mr. Carew, in the magnificent manner that compelled attention. 'He burn Shakspeare!—and only on Sunday he told me that, though he loved many plays, he positively worshipped Shakspeare.'

'But I renounce the worship!' cried Matt, in strong excitement, 'and never again, so long as I live, will I go to a playhouse or open a play-book.'

Standing by the smouldering fire, his face pale with passion, his eyes glittering, Matt appeared to his spectators of the gentler sex as a young confessor, witnessing to the truth before the world, represented by Dr. Beauchamp and Mr. Carew. The minister, however, was troubled; the lad's every word and look revealed how strong a temptation had taken him, and his guardian trembled and feared.

Matt's vow had exhausted his powers; he was conscious of a choking sensation in the throat, and would gladly have hidden himself from all eyes, whether wondering or admiring ones, but no—he would face it out to the end.

‘It is a pity to bind yourself so,’ said Mr. Carew; ‘especially as I don’t believe you’ll ever be a preacher. And mind you, my boy, this is what I called to say to you and Mr. Unwin both. You are more fit for a soldier than anything else. You are the very cut of one, height and build too, and you’ve the spirit and quickness of the — a — a — of a fighting cock’ — when sober, Mr. Carew never used strong words before ladies — ‘and as you are a gentleman by birth, you should adopt the calling of a gentleman. Come now, there’s nothing like the army; don’t you think so, Mrs. Unwin?’

‘I?’ said the astonished woman. ‘Indeed, sir, since you ask me, I must answer that it seems to me a dreadful thing for men to fight and kill each other.’

‘But it’s only the foes of their country whom they kill, and that is their duty; what do you say, Miss Unwin? A lady must admire soldiers.’

‘I have read — at least Matt has read to me,’ returned Grace modestly, ‘that the bravest soldiers in the field are the kindest,

gentlest men at home ; but still, war must be a terrible thing.'

Leaving Mr. Carew to discuss the soldier's calling with the ladies, Dr. Beauchamp walked a little way apart with the minister.

'Tony's notion of making your ward into a soldier no doubt sounds very outrageous to you,' he said, in a confidential tone, 'but to close with it on the spot would be quite as wise as to let the lad bind himself to be a minister while he is in this state of white heat. You are a sensible man, Mr. Unwin, you do not agree with rash vows.'

'No, indeed, sir, and as in this case I am much perplexed, I shall be the more careful to reason and to wait.'

'That is well. And now perhaps you will allow me to give you some advice about your trees. You do not believe in hard pruning, I see ; still, the knife wisely used is a benefit.' Once started on his pet subject, Dr. Beauchamp ran on volubly, advising the immediate removal of a dying fir-tree, the planting of a chestnut in its place, and the severe cropping

of the laurels, to all of which the minister listened with only half a mind.

Meanwhile Matt, in the same abstracted fashion, heard Mr. Carew's pleasant discourse with Mrs. Unwin and Grace. He longed for it to end; not that he heeded the fine speeches addressed to Grace, but simply that he might be free of every one. Presently the visitors took their departure, and then he instantly fled to his own room, where, throwing himself down on the bed, he burst into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ANNIVERSARY

THE Anniversary of the building of Aldbourne chapel, towards which the anticipations of its congregation had tendered for some time past, was fixed for the third week in June. The Anniversary was as grand an occasion for the display of new summer gowns and bonnets by the wives and daughters of chapel-goers as was Whitsuntide with their sisters of the Establishment, while such of the men as had any pretensions to oratory might look forward to speaking winged words, not in the hearing of their neighbours alone, but of strangers from outlying villages. These yearly jubilations were customary at all chapels, but in country places, where events are few, such festivals were welcomed very warmly even by many Church people, who did

not scruple to take any pleasure they could get. Thus in the heart of the Puritanism which had swept them away, village festivals had been born again, but with all the old jollity left out — for fiddle and pipe, was the singing of hymns; for the wild sallies of the Merry Andrew, the painful efforts of after-tea speakers; for dancing and games, sermons.

Now though the minister's flock hailed the Anniversary day, his wife dreaded it. Mr. Unwin was a great favourite with his brethren, and, as we all know, popularity has its drawbacks. The penalty in this case was a heavy one, being no less than the necessity of feeding all such ministers as took part in the day's celebration. Mrs. Unwin had not a grudging soul, but when you are obliged to stint your dearest ones in order to provide a feast for people who are nothing to you, the joys of hospitality become somewhat doubtful; no wonder, then, if the good woman suffered agonies in seeing her voracious guests devour in a twinkling food which would have sufficed her household for a fortnight. There seems to be something in devotional exercises very

provocative of hunger. The monks of old are reported to have been valiant trenchermen, the fat parsons of a century ago are said not to have been far behind them, while the lean curates of to-day are no mean wielders of knife and fork; but neither monk, parson, nor curate ever surpassed in gastro-nomic power the 'brethren' who gathered round Mr. Unwin's board.

'Wouldn't you have thought,' said the apprehensive housewife to Grace, 'that after a real heavy dinner at one o'clock, and a good tea at five, the edge would be off their appetites? Anyhow, it isn't so. I suppose the chapel service sharpens them again, for at supper they're as ready as ever.'

'Poor men!' returned Grace, 'perhaps they don't get good meals at home. I am sure some of them look starved.'

Grace hit the truth. The village minister who was unfurnished with the scholarship that would have enabled him, by teaching, to supplement his scanty income, found himself in a poor plight, and being often compelled, through lack of victuals, to go unsatisfied, he could

not, on festive occasions, 'put a knife to his throat,' as the wise man counsels.

'And there's the coat, shinier than ever,' lamented Mrs. Unwin; then, visibly brightening, 'But perhaps the Anniversary won't come. The king may die any day, and your father would certainly pay him the respect of putting off the Anniversary, and when a thing's put off, it sometimes doesn't come at all.'

His Most Gracious Majesty George IV. was, during this pleasant June weather, dragging out the last hours of his royal life, a life that had cost his country some millions, and had given back nothing that either utilitarian or idealist could call a fair return.

Mrs. Unwin's almost treasonable hope was in vain; as if bent on disappointing it, the King lingered still between life and death, and the Anniversary day came.

Matt, who formerly had found plenty of amusement at the yearly gathering, shrank from thought of the one now at hand. He had hitherto successfully avoided Mr. Masters,

but at the coming festival it would be impossible to avoid him any longer ; the deferred reproof would be given, and the offender must swallow it as best he could. He was at peace concerning the other elders of the congregation, for they, after a few feeble attempts at interference, yielded to their minister's reasoning, nor could the stern deacon incite them to renew the attack.

Since the burning of his play-books Matt had been his best self. Forbearing with Mrs. Unwin, wistfully attentive to the minister, and beyond all former wont devoted to Grace. He had always liked to be in her company, he now could not bear to be out of it. No doubt an empty box in his bedroom had something to do with his present craze for companionship ; besides, he soon found, like the wise Frenchman, that 'solitude is the devil's advocate.'

At an early hour of the Anniversary day the maidens of Mr. Unwin's flock were out gathering flowers for the adornment of the great tent, where the tea-drinking was to take place. This tent was pitched in the meadow

beside Deacon Penny's house, a piece of turf so carefully kept as to resemble a lawn.

The minister's parlour was full of flowers and sweet odours when Matt, soon after breakfast, entered it in search of Grace.

'What! Going so soon?' he cried, seeing her equipped for out-of-doors.

'Yes; there is a great deal to do.'

'I will come and help you, on condition that I am not handed over to Sophia Penny or Rebecca Masters; the giggling of the one is as unbearable as the stolidity of the other. I shall work only for you.'

At the tender intonation of the last words Grace blushed to the tint of a pale rose-coloured peony she held, and, turning away, she began to pack bunches of white pinks and purple stocks into a large basket.

'Gracie, I have something to tell you,' said Matt, intercepting her hand on its way to a posy, 'something that happened yesterday; and then I have something to ask you.'

'Mind, Grace, that you are back by twelve o'clock,' said Mrs. Unwin, showing at the door a face the very reverse of festive. 'The

ministers are sure to come before I am ready for them.'

'I will be here, mother,' said Grace cheerily; and then she and Matt, laden with flowers, set off down the village.

As they went along Matt's revelation trembled on his lips, but then he intended it as a prelude to something that could not be told in the public ways. So with a fluttering heart he walked beside Grace, whose heart was beating a duet with his. The exquisite consciousness of love was with them, pervading the air as did the scent of the flowers they carried, and in the sweet restraint of this mutual consciousness they passed on, arriving all too quickly at the meadow.

The tent was already in the hands of the more energetic workers, and these welcomed our pair with much effusion. But Grace, always apt to be in silence, was to-day quite unable to join in girlish prattle, and saying that she must soon hurry back to her mother, she began the labour of decorating in earnest, Matt assisting her. This devotion to the minister's daughter on the part of the most

acceptable young man in Aldbourne did not please the assembled girls, and many a lure was spread for Matt. Miss Sophia Penny, a slim and rather pretty maiden, mounted some high steps, thereby displaying a well-made foot and ankle. You will not be shocked, decorous reader, at Miss Penny's exhibition of her best points, since you are aware that, at the time of our story, women were known to be finished off in this charming fashion, and that consequently feet and ankles were legitimate objects of vanity. Nowadays, indeed, when the dear creatures are supposed to run on castors, like an easy-chair, such a revealing of facts would argue a sad depravity.

No sooner had Miss Penny climbed the steps than she required help, and Mr. Hare was implored to hand her boughs and flowers. This he did, but unfortunately without noticing the charms intended to strike him — a proof that the absorbed mind passes unheeding by Nature's fairest efforts.

Then Miss Rebecca Masters, disdaining common wiles, bluntly demanded Mr. Hare's

views on Particular Predestination. Pleased, however, as the student generally was to air upon this subject the logic he thought irresistible, to-day it had no temptation for him, and he gladly went away with Grace at the appointed time.

‘She’s been in love with him for ages, I know, and now I do believe he’s in love with her,’ said Miss Penny, looking after the retreating pair. ‘Though how a handsome young man can take to a plain thing like that is a mystery. Such feet and ankles too!’

‘In love!’ said Miss Masters contemptuously. ‘I don’t believe it. What nonsense you talk about looks, too—as if a godly minister would choose his partner for such foolish reasons. Solid qualities is what he should seek, piety and a decent portion, for father says a poor minister is a dreadful drag on a congregation.’

So spoke Rebecca Masters, echoing her father, whose hatred of the world, like that of many a latter-day Puritan, was only a half-hearted thing; for though he certainly despised all that makes the world beautiful,

he warmly appreciated all that makes it comfortable.

The day went on, and Matt got no chance of speaking alone with Grace, yet how sweetly significant to each was every word or look of the other, how utterly unimportant the presence and conversation of their guests! Not that Grace omitted her usual kindly attentions, but the 'brethren' might have been so many eating machines for any effect they had on her.

Dinner over, they all betook themselves to chapel, where a sort of preliminary service was held; and from thence they proceeded to Mr. Penny's meadow. The tent was so bedecked with flowers, so full of sweet smells, and displayed such a loaded board, as to present quite a striking resemblance to the sylvan lodge of our first parents when made ready for the entertainment of the 'affable archangel.' After many greetings, many compliments to the ladies on their work, and much casual babble, the company fell on the food, the strange ministers in particular disposing of it in a way which would have made any house-

wife but Mrs. Unwin hopeful of saving her supper. She, however, only shook her head ominously — she knew them too well.

When everybody had finished tea Mr. Unwin rose, thanked the visitors for their presence and his own people for their trouble, praised the arrangement of the flowers and the quality of the victuals, ending with a hope for as pleasant a meeting next year.

Speeches from both hosts and guests followed, all much of the same pattern, for though some orators had a copious flow of language while others hum'd and ha'd painfully, the glib, no less than the stammering tongue, spoke words of little meaning.

Matt, who was standing by one of the tent pillars, which he had helped Grace to decorate with pale blue iris and pale pink peonies, pretended to be lost in admiration of the flowers, that he might the better hide his scorn of the speechifying, when the voice of Mr. Masters struck his ear. He turned quickly and beheld the deacon —

Erect, morose, determined, solemn, slow,

and knew in an instant that an attack on himself was at hand.

Mr. Masters began by praising the caterers of the excellent meal just eaten, then widening his praise, he vaunted the whole congregation as the most considerate, generous, and easily pleased to be found anywhere. To such a congregation a minister surely owed a great deal. Coming at this point to a dead stop, he looked down the tent and saw Matt. The sight evidently whetted the edge of his tongue, for he continued in a very cutting way —

‘I’m one as had rather speak in season than out o’ season, but when I’m baffled every time I try to speak in season, I shall speak out of it, as Paul tells us we are to. Now nobody here has got more respect for our minister than me, but still, I say he’s wrong in shieldin’ from public rebuke a Church member as have publicly sinned. Why should one be tenderer dealt with than another? If anybody else had given place to the devil so, wouldn’t he have been had up before the Church? That’s what I’ve got to say, an’ if I’m wrong, p’raps somebody ’ll tell me what’s right.’

Thunderstruck the company listened to the deacon's onslaught, and for a moment Mr. Unwin himself seemed paralysed; the next, however, he rose, his face moved from mildness to indignation. But ere he could form a sentence Matt stepped forward, and, gracefully bowing, said —

‘Sir, if you will allow me, I will speak.’

The minister looked at the lad, noted his flushed face, his shining eyes, his quivering lips, his clenched hands, and, half in alarm, half in admiration, answered —

‘Certainly, my boy; we shall all gladly listen to you, and I feel sure you will say nothing you can afterwards regret.’

‘You may trust me, sir,’ said Matt confidently, ‘and though, when so many Fathers in Israel have spoken, I may well shrink from lifting up my voice, I am encouraged by these words of Holy Writ: “Let no man despise thy youth.”’

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he began, and in his voice was now a tremor which called forth all the sympathy of his audience, ‘we have been told by several speakers to-day that this

festival of ours is a serious occasion, and so it undoubtedly is when we look at it under certain aspects ; for instance, if we regard it as a landmark in our lives, a point at which our elders may well pause, and ask themselves whether they are omitting no opportunity to clothe their age with angel-like perfection, and we younger ones whether we are imitating our elders. Again, it is a serious occasion if we remember that at each festival we are, young and old, a year nearer the bourne from whence no traveller returns. But notwithstanding these grave thoughts, our festival is a joyful occasion too. Friends and acquaintances who seldom meet at any other time enjoy to-day some pleasant intercourse. Weary and worn pastors, who are scattered about in distant villages, to-day take sweet counsel together, and return to their little corners of the earth stronger in faith, hope, and charity. This particular Anniversary has been a remarkably agreeable one ; everything has gone well ; even the sun, who is so apt to hide his face from us, has shone unweariedly. That anything should happen to cloud the

brightness of the day seems then almost a misfortune ; but since a cloud has risen, it will perhaps be best to see if a little wind of words cannot blow it away.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I have to speak to you about myself — a thing that is very much like walking upon the tight-rope, it requires such wonderful balance — so my guardian tells me — I must therefore beg you to pardon me if I do not keep a perfect equilibrium.

‘You who are Aldbourne people know well the youth who lives under your pastor’s roof, while you who are our visitors to-day are not unacquainted with him ; and doubtless all of you are aware how this youth, brought up in Christian obedience and intended for the Christian ministry, has been guilty of great faults ; how he has deceived his guardian, and adventured himself into that pest-house of the soul — the theatre.

‘My friends, you who have abstained from bringing me up before the Church to answer for my conduct, let me tell you how sensible I am of your forbearance — indeed it forces me to a gentleness which your force had never

wrought, and here I thank you with all my heart.

‘Of my sins the less I speak the better. I will therefore leave them alone, nor will I plead anything to excuse them, for though the temptation to see the actor who eclipses all past and present tragedians was great — few of you can imagine how great — yet I know well —

’Tis one thing to be tempted, . . .

Another thing to fall.

Had I only confided in my guardian, I should have been saved bitter shame and regret. But I have determined never again, so long as I live, to visit a theatre, and I have also determined to begin my residence at College forthwith, where I shall study for the ministry, to which I believe myself called. My backsliding made me doubtful as to the reality of my call, but now I think truly that the call has come, and in mingled fear and confidence I respond to it.’

Matt uttered his resolve in a low solemn tone ; then his head drooped, and for a moment he paused ; soon, however, lifting his

head and looking straight at the minister, he continued —

‘But while I thank you all for your goodness towards me, there is one to whom thanks a thousandfold are due — to my guardian. Without his help, his tenderness, I tremble to think what might have befallen me. Ah, you say, we know our pastor; we see his patient continuance in well-doing, his watchfulness for souls, his faith, his poverty. But I often wonder,’ here Matt struck out his hand, and burst forth with amazing fervour, ‘I often wonder if you do perceive the daily beauty in his life; if you do understand what a saint goes in and out among you; if you do see how he is spending and being spent in your service; and if you foresee that he will continue so to spend and be spent until the hour when he shall yield —

His pure soul unto his captain Christ,
Under whose colours he has fought so long!’

Overcome by his own eloquence, Matt sat down and hid his face in his hands, while throughout the tent was a dead silence; you

could have heard in it the faintest clatter of a tea-cup. Many among the audience still stared open-mouthed at the lad who had so astonished them, for though most people knew something of his readiness in ordinary talk, they never supposed it would serve him when he stood up to make a speech. Was not Mr. Penny a man full of words? and yet no sooner did he get on his legs with intent to utter his brimming soul, than the words seemed to freeze in his throat, and he stood confessed a dumb dog. Yes, decidedly Matt had electrified the ears that had been listening to tiresome tongues for a couple of hours. His distinct utterance, his melodious voice, at the service of all emotions, few of his hearers would probably notice, but the extraordinary dash with which he spoke carried them all away. The minister himself, though expectant of fluent speech, was hardly less surprised than the rest of the company, but since even he did not recognise how much of Matt's language was quotation, he might well wonder. As to the eulogium of himself, it went to his heart; nor was his humility troubled thereat,

because he took it to be but the outcome of the boy's affection for him.

After the hush of a few moments the audience broke into loud applause, while Mr. Masters, hardly knowing what to make of Matt's avoidance of any direct answer to his attack, sat curling up his forehead like a sulky lion. But he attempted no further words, nor did any one else care to follow Matt. So the whole company moved off to the chapel for the final service.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE WHARF

‘LET us get out of all this crowd,’ said Matt to Grace, when the chapel service was over.

Grace was willing enough, so easily freeing themselves from the hubbub of congratulation all around, the pair went quickly down towards the river and into the wharf. Here Matt found a fine seat for both on the prostrate trunk of an oak, which lay close to the Ullen, and the two sat down with their faces turned to the north-west, where the sun was setting. A soft mist had just received him, and from it he sent forth a red glory over the sky and the water. Matt gazed up the river a few minutes, and then turned to his companion, whose pale face looked rosy in the sunset glow.

‘Gracie,’ he said softly, putting his hand

on hers, 'I meant to have told you of my resolve before telling anybody else; but I could not get a chance to speak to you to-day, and then when Mr. Masters attacked your father in that odious manner, I was obliged to get up and say what was in my mind. You are not vexed with me?'

'Oh no, I am only so glad of your determination. When did you make it?'

'At Stanton yesterday. O Grace, we had such miserable speeches and sermons there, worse than here; I got so restless under them, and could not help thinking that, young as I was, I could speak better than anybody there, except your father; and presently, during the evening sermon, it seemed as if a voice said in my ear, "Stand up and preach, stand up and preach!" It was so real that I started up, and only remembered myself when I saw people turning round to stare at me. They probably thought the sermon had moved me, and that I was about to testify like a hysterical Methodist; if so, they were mistaken; I sank down and forgot them all. Of course I told the minister, and he at once inclined to believe

that I had a call. Many a one, he says, who has been in doubt, from Augustine downwards, has been determined to the religious life by such a mysterious voice.'

Matt certainly had had no thought of suppression, but it is doubtful whether he had unfolded to the minister, as openly as he now did to Grace, his extreme contempt for the utterances of yesterday on the occasion of the chapel Anniversary at the neighbouring village of Stanton.

'O Matt!' said the girl, awe-struck at the tale. 'No doubt it is a call.'

'I believe so,' said Matt gravely, 'and I feel the more sure because, while they were going on with their tedious prattle to-day, I got an impulse to speak. I did not hear the voice again, but the power of it was with me, and when Mr. Masters threw those reflections upon the minister, I could hold myself back no longer—and, Grace, I do not think I lacked either matter or words.'

'No, indeed; it was wonderful,' said Grace, with a deep breath. 'But had you really not planned it before?'

‘Well, I had sometimes thought what I should say if I were called up before the congregation, but I can assure you I said very little of what I had planned, and a great deal of what I had not planned.’

‘And the beautiful things about father?’

‘Ah, they are always in my mind.’

‘But, O Matt, they made the people cry,’ said Grace, in tender triumph. ‘I believe that you were born to be a preacher.’

As Grace uttered the words, a tricksy spirit whispered in Matt’s ear Farmer Dixon’s speech — ‘Lad, you’re a born actor.’ But the remembrance was to him, in his present mood, an evident temptation of the devil; he thrust it away, and said gravely —

‘My father always hoped that I should be a preacher.’

‘You will be,’ said Grace, with absolute confidence, ‘a great preacher.’

‘You are a dear little prophet,’ said Matt, leaning forward that he might look into her eyes. ‘But whether I turn out a great or a little preacher, will you marry me?’

Grace’s head sank lower and lower, until

her face was hidden from Matt beneath the shade of her bonnet. The yieldingness of her whole form gave an affirmative reply to her lover's question, but he wanted it in words.

'Gracie, I have loved you for years,' he pleaded. 'Do you love me?'

She lifted her head, raised her eyes in complete surrender, and breathed the softest 'Yes.'

After this confession they sat a long while in happy talk or still happier silence, whose bliss you have probably experienced yourself, dear reader; if you have not, no words can make it clear to you: thus either way description is wasted.

Just at the feet of our pair was a still pool of water, divided from the rush of the river by a little island set with willows, and now when the sun had sunk, the edges of the pool became dark, while yet in the centre shone that light which seems rather a mysterious emanation from below than a reflection of the sky. Grace, looking dreamily at the pool, suddenly was aware that the light grew paler.

'It is getting late,' she said, slowly rising. 'We must go.'

‘Must we?’ sighed Matt. ‘I hate to think of meeting all those people.’

‘Perhaps they will have gone.’

At thought of the possibility Matt bestirred himself, and the two reluctantly turned their backs upon the river.

Grace had divined rightly; the guests, making short work of supper in their anxiety to reach home at what they considered a Christian hour, had emptied the dishes and departed.

The minister was sitting in the best parlour, his white hair shining in the dim light, his whole aspect full of peace, and beside him, strange to say, was his wife. That Mrs. Unwin should sit with her hands before her was a thing no creature had ever yet seen. Why was she not helping Kezia to clear away the supper things, and casting rueful glances at the bare dishes?

‘Ah, Grace and Matt, I’m glad you have come,’ she said cheerily, rising as the young folks entered. ‘I wanted you to come; I have something to show you — something very pretty.’ Here Mrs. Unwin dived into her

pocket. 'We must have a light to see it by,' she said.

Wondering much what the pretty thing might be, Grace fetched a candle.

'God send us the light of heaven,' murmured Mr. Unwin, as was usual with him at the evening lighting.

But Mrs. Unwin's thoughts were set on a thing of earth.

'Look,' she said, putting into Grace's hand a slip of thin paper.

Matt bent over Grace to see it too.

'A ten-pound note!' he cried.

'Yes, a ten-pound note!' echoed Mrs. Unwin. 'It's a present from Mr. Plowden. He gave it to your father after chapel this evening; good kind man, and he a Churchman too. It's more than any one of our own people has done all these years.'

'They have not the means,' said the minister, 'while Mr. Plowden is a prosperous man. Nevertheless his gift is as generous as it is welcome.'

Mr. Plowden was, as Mr. Unwin has just said, a Churchman, but a very broad one, of

whom there were many at this period — unbiassed people, who went to church in the morning and to chapel in the evening — devil-dodgers, as they were coarsely called, who were determined to be right one way or another.

‘Welcome it is,’ said Mrs. Unwin, almost in tears. ‘Now we can buy the coat; and we needn’t stint with coals all through next winter.’

‘This is a memorable day for both of us,’ said the minister to his wife. ‘A day on which God has sent us both our heart’s desire; to you, money for the clothing and warming of your household; to me, the certainty of this boy’s call to the ministry.’

Matt grasped his guardian’s hand, and with his disengaged arm encircled Grace, and drew her towards her father, saying, in a much moved voice, ‘I also have my heart’s desire. Grace has promised to be my wife.’

‘Little Grace!’ cried the minister, exceedingly surprised. ‘Why, she is only a child.’

‘I shall be twenty next birthday, father,’ said Grace blushing.

‘Just as old as I,’ said Matt; ‘and of course we shall not think of being married until I have gone through my college course, and have got settled work.’

‘My boy, there is no one to whom I would so willingly give this treasure of mine,’ returned the minister heartily. ‘If I seemed reluctant, it is only that I am so amazed at the thing. I suppose I have been blind to what was going on under my eyes.’

‘Yes, indeed, you have, William,’ said his wife. ‘I saw it long ago — at least I saw it on Matt’s side; about Grace I wasn’t so sure.’

‘And do you give your consent with mine?’

‘Well, if they’re contented to wait until Matt can get a decent living, I won’t say anything against it,’ returned Mrs. Unwin, quite cheerfully. ‘But I do hope he won’t worry to be married and unsettle you, Grace — and let me tell you, a minister’s wife has got her work cut out.’

After some pleasant talk the four retired to rest, each with fair thoughts for a pillow. Matt at first dwelt on his happy love-making,

but presently in the period betwixt asleep and awake, when the will is at the mercy of the memory, his lately-uttered speech took possession of his brain. Over and over again he repeated it, over and over again he saw the amazement of his audience, heard their applause. Meanwhile Grace, with a tender mist in her eyes, was murmuring, 'I, too, have my heart's desire.' The minister, for his part, looked forward to the time when Matt should be a faithful preacher of the gospel, with a wife who would help him more up than on. But perhaps Mrs. Unwin had the most solid satisfaction of the four, in her anticipation of the new coat and the coals.

CHAPTER XVI

MATT'S DEPARTURE

SUMMER days have a trick of slipping by us but half enjoyed, and thus they treated Matt, presenting him, indeed, with charming opportunities of love-making, but merging into mid-September before he was aware. Very soon now he must exchange the lover's life for the student's — country for town. Although so blessed in the present, he sometimes felt a restless longing to start on his college course, and prove to the minister that the call had not come in vain. Moreover, since his outpouring at the Anniversary, he was possessed by a great desire to utter his soul in lofty words, and he knew that, from the very commencement of his studentship, he would be trained to preach. Mr. Unwin, conscious of the lad's ready tongue, had dis-

couraged him from public speaking, lest premature success therein should turn his head. The minister here went dead against the practice of most Nonconformists, who are used to set young men preaching long ere they have cut their wisdom teeth.

One day, just before his departure from Aldbourne, Matt, finding Grace too busy to accompany him, started off on a solitary walk. Passing through the village, by the church and the mill, he took the road towards the parson's glebe, called Poppy Farm, which, as we know, was in the occupation of Mr. Dixon. Beside this road the little Ald flows for a space, and in its limpid waters you may now and then see a silver trout proudly parading his pink spots. Matt did not, however, loiter by the brook, but turned up Green Lane, a gentle ascent between certain fields belonging to Poppy Farm, which joins the Deercourt Road half-way up Aldbourne Hill. Green Lane merits its title; it is green above and green below, high hedge-rows close it in, trees over-arch it, while grass grows on each side of the way. Matt went slowly up the

lane, stopping here and there to gather a sad-coloured scabious or a blue harebell, the only wildflowers left now ; or, where the tall trees ceased for a space, to pluck a blackberry from the great bunches of fruit which hung over the hedge. But of these only one in a bunch was yet black, and that was sour ; so after a few wry faces Matt turned his attention to the hazel-trees, which grew thickly in places, and pulled down a few nuts. They were not more satisfactory than the blackberries, having kernels like small peas enclosed in fine casings of pith. Matt gave up his fruit-gathering in disgust, and, arrived at the point where Green Lane joins the Deercourt Road, he sat down on a plough that had been left beside the way, and through a break in the hedge looked at the view. At the foot of the slope whereon he rested nestled the village amidst its trees. Eastwards flowed the Ullen towards some unseen exit between the encompassing hills. A light haze lay over the distant woods and uplands, and the whole landscape looked drowsy under the gray September sky. As yet the trees kept their dark summer foliage,

only a beech or two showed a tinge of russet, and a silver birch shed a few yellow leaves upon the ground. In the spring Green Lane is a veritable concert hall for the birds, nightingales, of course, leading the choir, but to-day not a note broke the stillness; even a robin, who had attended Matt half way up the lane, and now peered curiously at him from the top of the hedge-row, did not trouble to sing.

Matt, sitting upon the plough, was taking a farewell look at the scene he knew so well, when he was startled by the quick whirr of wings in the field behind him, followed instantly by the double report of a gun, the flight of a covey of partridges over his head, and a shower of shots around him. A moment more, and Mr. Dixon, his gun upon his shoulder, and a brace of dead birds in his hand, stepped through a gap into the lane.

‘Why, young sir,’ he cried, at sight of Matt, ‘I might have shot you.’

‘I don’t feel sure that you have not done so,’ said Matt, shaking a shot or two from his hat. ‘The things rattled round me like hail.’

‘No, no,’ said Mr. Dixon, with a slow

smile, 'I shot too high to hit anybody standin' up, let alone sittin' down. You see, I was out pot-huntin' a bit, and never met with a thing till up gets these blessed birds. But now, just to make up for the fright you've had, I'll give 'em to you.'

'I am sure you are very kind, sir,' said Matt, taking the birds, 'and Mr. Unwin will be pleased; he has had no game yet.'

'I suppose not,' replied the farmer, drily; then with a comical twinkle of his eyes and a still more comical elongation of his lips, he demanded — 'What were you doin' here? Thinkin' about your sweetheart?'

'Of course I was,' returned Matt readily. 'What can a man do better?'

'Not much, except work for her.'

'I shall do that directly. I am going to London next week.'

'What, to start play-actor? You'll get on at that an' no mistake.'

'I am not going to be an actor,' said Matt, in a strained tone. 'I shall never enter a theatre again. I am sorry enough I ever did so. I am going to study for the ministry.'

‘O you’ve settled that, have you?’ said the sturdy Churchman grimly. ‘Then all I can say is that you’re like money spent in gamblin’ — good stuff put to a bad use.’

Before Matt could reply, a well-known figure appeared round the bend of the road from Deercourt. It was Dr. Beauchamp, with his gaiters on and a small axe in his hand. He had been giving his advice to the squire this morning anent the felling of trees in a too-crowded copse, and had used his axe to mark the doomed ones. These, you may be certain, were such weaklings as hindered the growth of their more robust brethren without benefiting their own.

The parson greeted our pair pleasantly, and then looked askance at the brace of birds in Matt’s hand. Mr. Dixon saw his landlord’s glance, and smiled a wise smile. With all his nearness the farmer never grudged a present of game. As a sportsman he, of course, held by the game laws, but he agreed with Squire Carew that every one in the parish ought to taste game occasionally — the gentry and farmers, birds, the shopkeepers, hares, and the

cottagers, rabbits. But Dr. Beauchamp, though so open-handed in general, was, as his tenant knew, greedy in the matter of game. He did not indeed crave it for his own table, but for the tables of friends. Nothing pleased him better than to send a leash of birds, or a brace of pheasants to some old college crony, and every head of game supplied from Poppy Farm had a fixed destination long before it actually appeared at the Rectory.

‘I’ve just given the young gentleman a brace of birds,’ said Mr. Dixon, in a tone of great enjoyment, ‘for I shouldn’t wonder if, when the rest of the parish gets a bird or a rabbit, Mr. Unwin is left out.’

‘Ay, ay, perhaps,’ returned Dr. Beauchamp shortly. A Dissenting minister could hardly expect to dine on partridges, he thought; then, reminded by the sight of Matt of the *auto-da-fé* he had seen consummated — ‘But you, Mr. Matt, what have you been doing lately? Have you burnt any more play-books?’

‘No, sir,’ replied Matt flushing; ‘I had no more to burn.’

‘Exactly, exactly. Well, no doubt you

supposed you were doing a wise thing, but I believe you made a great mistake.'

'And now he's goin' to make another,' said Mr. Dixon. 'He's goin' to study pa'sonin', leastways Methodist pa'sonin'.'

'What? what?' cried the rector. 'You mean to be a preacher! Surely you cannot like the prospect.'

'I ought to like it. I have chosen it for myself.'

'Exactly so; but there is such a thing as choosing what is very plainly desired by one's friends.'

'It is more than that with me,' returned Matt gravely. 'I have a call.'

'A call, a call!' ejaculated the little parson, jerking the words out scornfully. 'I should like to know the meaning of that expression.'

Dr. Beauchamp had, at his own ordinations, professed himself truly 'called' to the offices of both deacon and priest; but a call to the ministry of the Established Church signified too often only the fact of a vacant family living, and Dr. Beauchamp might well be quite in the dark as to the meaning the word had for Matt.

‘Sir,’ said the lad, with a fine astonishment, ‘if you do not know what a “call” is, I am sure I cannot explain it to you.’

‘A call,’ said Farmer Dixon, with the air of being about to throw light on obscurity. ‘If I can’t tell you what a “call” is, I can tell you how it works. There’s Allen the saddler’s got a “call.” So off he goes preachin’ instead of mindin’ his customers; an’ the other day, when, for a wonder, I did catch him at home, and blew him up sky high for not mendin’ some traces I’d sent him by the time he said, if he didn’t throw his “call” in my face. He must attend to that, he said, an’ the Lord ’ud attend to his business. I heard the same week as he’d been preachin’ on Thorndon Common, an’ the boys threw brick-bats at him, an’ pinned crackers to his tail. I hope you won’t get served so, young gentleman.’

‘Crackers pinned to his tail; no, that’s not likely,’ said the parson, with an admiring glance at Matt. ‘Any opposition to the part he has chosen will come from within, not from without.’

Dr. Beauchamp spoke with unwonted

gravity, and the words haunted Matt on the way home, but Mr. Unwin's entire belief in the reality of the 'call' soon drove away thoughts of the parson's prophecy: it was, however, destined to be remembered later on.

A day or two after his walk Matt, full of high resolve, climbed to the top of the Dulford coach, saw his wooden box — furnished with many proofs of Mrs. Unwin's and of Grace's industry — hoisted up likewise, and turned his back upon Aldbourne.

Mr. Unwin had chosen Homerton as Matt's College, both because he had himself studied there, and because the ruling President was a man of much learning.

Behold Matt, then, entered at College, working away at all the subjects required of him, and making a respectable figure in most of them. Two things he studied *con amore*, the art of oratory and Greek plays, for certain parts of the grand old tragedies were set before the Homerton students. Thus occupied in learning, Matt's time flew past. A day was never long enough for the work to be done therein, and yet the day when he bade

farewell to Aldbourne seemed a year ago. Grace's experience was exactly opposite to that of her lover, for while the last kiss appeared to have been given only yesterday, the days dragged themselves out drearily, each one having the length of two. Nothing of any importance happened to her, except the coming of Matt's letters, which, however, were like angels' visits, few and far between. At this period postage was heavy, and sweethearts in far easier circumstances than our pair had to be contented with hearing but seldom from one another. But now Christmas was at hand, there would be no more need of letters. Full of tender anticipation, Grace prepared for the happy time, and desirous to be pleasing in her lover's eyes, she made for herself a new winter frock of his favourite dove-coloured gray.

CHAPTER XVII

MATT'S FIRST SERMON

IN the afternoon of a cold bright day, just as the village windows were reflecting the rays of the setting sun, the Dulford coach stopped at the 'King's Head.' From the box descended a single passenger, a young man, who looked eagerly round, as if expecting some one. Ay, and there upon the pebble path which flanks the doctor's garden is a little muffled figure, uncertain whether to come forward or not.

'Gracie!' cried the traveller, dashing up to the figure, and seizing both its hands.

Grace murmured an almost inaudible greeting, but her eyes shone as brightly as the sun-lit windows, and on her face was a warmer glow than that on the sky.

The two hurried home to the blazing fire,

the pleasant result of Mr. Plowden's summer bounty.

'I can't see you in your out-of-doors gear,' said Matt, beginning to untie Grace's bonnet, and to unpin her shawl. "'Off, off, you lendings. Come—'" Making a wry face he swallowed the remainder of the quotation, and continued quickly—'There now, divested of your disguise, you are the dearest little thing in the world, and prettier than ever.'

And indeed in her new gown and large white collar, the happiness at her heart beaming from her countenance, Grace might have appeared pretty in other eyes than Matt's.

'But you are pale and thin,' she said, when the strange sweet shyness she felt had worn off. 'You do not look so well as when you went away.'

Grace's opinion was presently endorsed both by her mother and father, the former attributing Matt's wan looks to town food and town air, the latter to close study and to the oncoming of man's responsibilities. After a short time, however, his guardian began to

fear that there must be something more. Not only was the lad pale and thin, but his happy frankness of manner had given place to a strained cheerfulness, and over the sunshine of his face too often came a cloud. Mr. Unwin questioned him affectionately as to his liking for his new life, and Matt expressed entire contentment therewith; still, the minister was not satisfied; somehow he did not seem able to reach the heart, once so responsive to his touch.

According to wont, he kept his uneasiness within his own breast, and took comfort when he saw that Grace was quite untroubled by any anxieties. In truth, when alone with Grace, much of Matt's constraint vanished, and as he sought her society more persistently than ever, and, when in it, showed himself a very tender lover, she might well think lightly of any change either in his manner or appearance.

One day, when the holidays were about a week old, Mr. Unwin was cheered by a letter from the President of Matt's College, wherein the learned writer commended the lad's ap-

plication to work, spoke warmly of his personal qualities, and mentioned that the divinity tutor considered 'young Hare's gift in speech to be something quite out of the common.'

'My lad,' said the minister, when he had read the letter aloud to his little family, 'you have spoken with acceptance to town critics, you will then gratify me by speaking to our simple village-folk next Sunday evening?'

'I will, if you wish it, sir,' said Matt, with evident reluctance; 'but it will be much worse to preach here than in town.'

'What!' cried Mrs. Unwin, in great surprise; 'worse to preach before friends who'll make allowance for you, than before strangers who 'ud be hard on you?'

'Friends have proverbially been the hardest judges of a man from the days of Job downwards. "Save me from my friends" has been the cry ever since then,' said Matt drily. 'Of course it is bad enough to preach before strangers, but then these strangers are my fellow-students, and if they are hard on me, I have the right to be equally hard on them, for, as you know, we criticise one another's

sermons. Consequently, however feeble my attempts may be, I am comforted by the certainty of hearing plenty more quite as feeble. Thus in the multitude of mediocrities is safety.'

'But there is the divinity tutor,' said Grace, in quite an awe-struck voice, 'and you told us that he summed up each sermon.'

'And who knows better than he the extreme difficulty of speaking even moderately well?' returned Matt, with much animation. 'I would far rather have him for my audience than the Aldbourne congregation. You see, sir,' he continued, turning to Mr. Unwin, 'the very fact of caring so much to please must lay a weight on a man, and prevent him from rising out of himself, as he should do in preaching.'

'Then, my lad,' said Mr. Unwin reverently, 'it will be best in preaching to care only to please the Great Judge, who will accept the weakest effort made with a single eye to His glory.'

'You are right, sir,' returned Matt humbly; 'and I will try to feel as you say.'

Alone with Grace, later in the day, Matt recurred to his dread.

‘Fancy standing up in that pulpit,’ he said, visibly wincing, ‘with all those well-known eyes staring, and all those well-known mouths gaping at me, as I have so often seen them at your father. O dear! I believe I shall either laugh at them or turn tail and run away.’

‘But, Matt,’ returned Grace wonderingly, ‘you used to say how fine it would be to preach in Aldbourne chapel.’

‘My tongue was too fool-hardy then.’

Notwithstanding his shrinking from the ordeal before him, Matt bore himself bravely enough through the week, and even on Sunday evening, when he walked with Mr. Unwin to chapel, he had such an air of confidence that not a creature could have supposed his heart in his body to be no bigger than a pin’s head.

Too soon the dreaded moment came. The youthful preacher mounted the pulpit, and after a short prayer gave out his text — ‘The world by wisdom knew not God.’

Every eye was fixed eagerly upon him, as

he felt to his inmost soul, though he gazed all the while at the open page of the Bible. His face grew crimson, and then became deadly pale. Mrs. Unwin, who watched him anxiously from a side seat, thought he was going to faint, but he recovered himself, and in a voice only slightly disturbed, proceeded to divide the coming discourse into heads. Here he got along quite fluently, and, taking up his first division—the world—he was about to picture the state of things in the first year of Our Lord, when all of a sudden his mind became an utter blank. He mechanically repeated his last words. He looked wildly at his tiny paper of notes, hoping it would give him help. All it said was—‘condition of heathen world at coming of Christ.’ He sought in his memory for the facts he knew so well: not one could he recall. For what seemed to him an age, but was really only about a couple of minutes, he stood, his knees shaking under him, while the congregation stared at him in open-eyed amazement. Covering his face with his hands he gasped out—‘O I have lost all my ideas!’—and

then he sat down in the pulpit, which was tall enough to hide him completely from view. In the merciful shelter he heard, as in a half dream, the minister's voice speaking apologetic words; there was something about youth and inexperience, but what, he was too bewildered to understand. He heard the people moving away, and did not know how full of sympathy and of hopeful prophecies were many of them.

‘He'll make a fine preacher yet; so don't you fret, ma'am, an' don't you fret, miss,’ said Dame Brooke confidently, to Mrs. Unwin and Grace, the former of whom was weeping pathetically, while the latter stood beside her pale and dumb. ‘He do speak out well, so as 'tis a pleasure to hear,’ continued the consoler; ‘an' in especial when you're gettin' a leetle dunny — an' O mercy! what a well-favoured young gentleman!’

When there was a hush in the chapel Matt came quickly from the pulpit, and entered the vestry, where, stern as fate, stood Deacon Masters.

‘Well, young sir,’ he said, in his steeliest

tones, 'so you haven't turned out such a orator as we expected. I hope, I'm sure, as the poor set out you've made 'll teach you humility.'

Matt gasped; his throat was dry; he could not utter a word, but his eyes darted an angry glance at his tormentor.

'Who 'ud have thought o' the eloquent Mr. Hare, as we've heard of preaching to the quality in town, a-makin' such a figure before a poor village congregation?' continued the deacon, who, unlike many censors, loved to find fault with a mute offender. 'Tis a proof as this worldly learnin' is jest nothin' at all; it only serves to puff folks up, an' make them think themselves summat when they're nought. What's wanted, young man, is grace — grace.'

'Matt, my boy,' said the minister, coming into the vestry, and perceiving the state of matters between Matt and the deacon, 'you will not be cast down by this sudden nervous seizure. Many a most eloquent and gifted preacher has experienced the same.'

Matt looked up in his guardian's face,

grasped his hand, and then, turning to Mr. Masters with a haughtiness which sat oddly on his graceful person, said —

‘ I shall preach next Sabbath evening.’

CHAPTER XVIII

MATT'S SECOND SERMON

DEFIANCE often, especially in youth, furnishes an incentive to action which no other passion has been able to supply. Thus it affected Matt, making him actually long for the coming of the moment he had beforetime dreaded, and giving him an assurance that he would speak so as to silence all carping.

As the important hour drew near he became a little restless, but he never faltered in his resolve, and presently he boldly mounted the pulpit stairs, and gave out his last Sunday's text. At sound of it Grace trembled, while the congregation and the minister, though admiring the lad's courage, feared lest the same train of thought should end in the same dispersion of ideas. Their fears were heightened when they heard him divide his text in

precisely the same way as before, and again take for description its first division. After a few moments, however, fear was turned to admiration. The young preacher handled his subject in quite a masterly fashion, painting in gloomy colours a picture of 'the world.' His shades were certainly too dark ; his relief too little ; he was besides guilty of anachronisms, introducing the abomination of the circus and the orgies of later emperors into the reign of Augustus ; but thus he made all the more impression ; and when, passing from shadow to blackness, he enlarged on St. Paul's tremendous indictment of the heathen world, he made the simple folks before him turn cold at view of a corruption so flagrant, so universal.

With the second part of his text — 'The wisdom of the world' — he seemed delightfully at home. In simple and interesting language he told his unlearned hearers about the grand literature of the Greeks — about poets, historians, philosophers ; ending with a eulogium of him whose conceptions of the soul and of wisdom were on a level with those of Scripture itself. He then spoke of the art which

accompanied this literature — of the painting, the sculpture, the building — as unsurpassed and unsurpassable. He now went on to tell how the letters and arts of Greece became the study and the model of Rome. ‘And yet,’ he cried, ‘we have seen that all this learning, all this art, all this admiration for noble and beautiful things, all this appreciation of the sage’s wisdom, the worker’s skill, did not save Roman society from corruption.’

Matt’s train of thought led naturally to the third division of his text — to Him who, hidden from the knowledge of the world, was yet its only salvation ; and in words so heart-moving did the young preacher speak of the God and Father of all, as to bring tears to many eyes, and to fill the minister’s breast with a holy joy.

Almost for the first time during his sermon Matt, sensible of the effect he was producing, looked steadily at his congregation. As he did so there flashed into his mind the remembrance of another weeping audience, and of a storm-tossed old man who cried in a pathetic voice —

Be your tears wet ? yes, faith. I pray, weep not.

Even as it came, Matt drove the memory away, and the pause he made was so slight, it only added force to his peroration, which was an appeal to his hearers to choose the heavenly wisdom.

The sermon over, he hurried down the pulpit steps and into the vestry, much to the disappointment of the people, who longed first to take a good stare at him, and then to compliment him to his face. An emotional preacher has even in our days a strong hold over the majority of hearers; he was at this time regarded as the angel of God.

Matt having disappeared, his admirers crowded around Mr. Unwin to offer congratulations, while Deacon Masters, turning his back upon the flutter of the congregation, stalked grimly home.

‘O Matt,’ whispered Grace, as the young preacher came out of the vestry, ‘I am so happy.’

‘Are you?’ said Matt, with odd dryness.

‘Yes, oh yes. You preached so beautifully, you made everybody cry. You can —’

‘Don’t talk about it now,’ said Matt, in a low voice. ‘I feel used up somehow, and can’t bear it.’

Later in the evening, however, he had to bear some discussion of his sermon, for the minister’s joy must needs find words.

‘My dear lad,’ he said — the usually subdued light in his face changed to radiance — ‘you have astonished us all. There can be no doubt that an excellent gift is in you. Strive, then, to bring it as near perfection as may be; and yet always acknowledge it to be a gift, not a thing of your own achieving. And now, if you will allow me to act as your divinity tutor, I will say a word about your sermon. It was excellently thought out, and super-excellently worded; but one thing I must question, which is your view of the utterly God-forsaken state of the world before the coming of Christ. I often think there is a deep truth in Augustine’s words — “What is now called the Christian religion has existed among the ancients, and was not absent from the beginning of the human race.”’

‘Well, I’m sure, Matt,’ struck in Mrs. Un-

win, directly her husband's voice fell at the end of his quotation, 'you never ought to be nervous any more, preaching with such acceptance as you have done to-night, making everybody cry, and putting the minister quite in the shade.'

Mrs. Unwin's unfailing tactlessness made her apt to proclaim unpleasant truths. We all number such candid souls among our acquaintances. A fact is clear to themselves, then let it be made clear to others, whomsoever it may hurt.

'That is absurd, ma'am,' cried Matt, blushing painfully. 'The minister is as far beyond me in preaching as in everything else.'

'At any rate,' said Mrs. Unwin, in a rather injured tone, 'the people talked about your sermon as if they had never heard a good one before.'

'They liked it because it was shallow,' replied Matt readily. 'So few people can really think, and a glib talker naturally suits them.'

'Well, my boy,' said the minister, with a smile, 'you are more likely to acquire depth than I am to acquire glibness.'

Matt evidently did not care to pursue the subject, since he turned to Grace with some anecdote of the President of his College, whom he had in much admiration. Presently, however, when the womenfolk had gone to bed, he drew his chair nearer the minister's, and, making a visible effort, he said —

‘Sir, you are good enough to commend my preaching, but I, for my part, feel as if I could never preach again.’

‘You are undergoing the reaction from a great strain,’ said the minister, laying his hand on Matt’s shoulder. ‘You are wearied out, body and mind. Go to rest, my dear boy; in the morning you will take quite a different view of things.’

Matt lingered. On his lips was the cry — ‘I want another sort of preaching than you set before me.’ He tried to muster courage to utter it, to tell how, in the midst of his sermon to-night, a remembrance had come to him, bringing with it a mighty temptation; how on the very threshold of the ministry, he was almost irresistibly drawn back to what his hearer would consider per-

dition. Yet somehow, each time he attempted to speak, the words refused to come. O if only his guardian would help him to confession! But Mr. Unwin's insight seemed to have failed him; perhaps he was dazzled by his pupil's brilliant success; anyway he saw nothing of the tempest in Matt's mind. The lad glanced at the face beside him, noted that it shone with a more than ordinary happiness, and gave up all thought of bringing a cloud upon it to-night.

In the solitude of his own room the temptation came upon him with redoubled force, and for a while overpowered all his resistance. Quite delivered up to it, he paced his room, repeating with impassioned gesticulation the end of the final scene of *King Lear*. When he had finished, a great conflict arose within him. The battle of six months ago had to be fought all over again. At last, after much wrestling and many prayers, it seemed to him as if the devil departed from him. 'I have chosen the right,' he murmured, and, exhausted but calm, he lay down to sleep.

During his stay in Aldbourne he was vexed

with no further doubts. He preached again, and even better than before ; moreover, though again the people were greatly moved, no disturbing remembrance came to him. Only on the eve of his departure to town a vague uneasiness befell him, which, however, might very well be caused by the prospect of separation from Grace. The two were taking a farewell walk over Archer's Hill, and looking at the view, so changed from that which they had seen together seven months ago. The valley everywhere was covered with water, for the heavy winter rains had caused the Ullen to overflow its banks, and turn green fields and meadows into a lake. The trees looked oddly out of place in the midst of water, while many hedge-rows were entirely submerged, and the 'Cygnet' stood upon an island. Over the locks and the weir the river swept, as if threatening to carry such trivial impediments away. Upon the waste of waters lowered a heavy sky, boding more rain.

'The flood is still rising,' observed Grace, 'and father says if it comes up much higher the village will be flooded, and we shall have

to go to chapel in a boat. The old folk tell him they remember being punted down the street.'

Matt, looking abstractedly at the flood, made no answer, but presently, turning to Grace, he said, heartily —

'How I wish that my college course had come to an end, and that to-morrow, instead of going away from you, I could carry you off with me. I should be safe then.'

He murmured the last words so low Grace did not catch them.

'I wish it too,' she said, with a blush and a sigh. 'But I suppose we must not give way to vain wishes.'

The next morning Matt again climbed the coach, and departed, taking with him the warmth and colour of Grace's life. It must be a moonlight existence until his return in the summer. The short spring holidays he was to spend with his mother's relations at Richmond.

CHAPTER XIX

STRANGE TIDINGS

MATT's letters, which had before Christmas come at uncertain intervals, now appeared regularly every fortnight, and upon each Grace lived until the arrival of the next. Nobody suspected what those letters were to her. Our friends must judge us principally by our bearing, so no wonder if the girl's extreme quietness imposed upon the curious folk of the congregation, who were keen to see what effect the being 'in love' had on her.

'I don't believe she cares a bit, for all he's such a beautiful young man, and such a splendid preacher,' pronounced Miss Penny, with a sigh.

'She's such a quiet sort o' body,' returned Dame Brooke; 'you can't tell whe'er she cares or no.'

Grace the while lived her inner life, troubling not a whit about her neighbours' observations. But presently a shadow crept over her heart's sunshine. Matt had gone to Richmond for his spring holidays, and had written from thence at the beginning of his stay, expressing anticipations of a delightful visit, and promising to send a long account of it when he returned to town. Time, however, passed by; he must have gone back to College six weeks ago, and yet no word had come from him. Every day Grace looked for a letter; every day she had to make shift with hope deferred. She wrote three or four times to the silent Matt, then, afraid of burdening him with postage—for each letter would cost him nearly a shilling—she waited with what patience she might. She could not hide her trouble entirely from her parents, but the minister, supposing there to be some little difference between the pair, and knowing that to interfere in a lover's quarrel requires a touch as delicate as to catch a butterfly without injuring its plumage, refrained from remark, while the mother set her daughter's depression down to being in love.

Girls were never any good when they began to think about a man. Those of the better sort always got into the dumps, those of the baser sort always turned silly.

‘There was Jemima Brown,’ said Mrs. Unwin to her husband one morning when Grace’s lack of spirits had been more evident than usual, ‘as sensible and deedy a servant as we ever had; and no sooner did that glazier fellow come to mend some broken panes of glass, and just look through the window at her, than she went clean crazy. She set the kettle, with no water in it, on a blazing fire, and burnt the bottom out. She lit the parlour fire with the register shut, and nearly smoked us to death. Oh, and a thousand such things. Ay, there’s Kezia, too, beginning to pass words with that new man Mr. Masters has got. I caught them whispering at the back door yesterday, and if I didn’t find her afterwards sweeping the parlour carpet with a mop!’

Mr. Unwin escaped from the catalogue of the love-stricken damsels’ follies, and retreated to the peaceful nook where his wife never

intruded. Taking from the shelf his favourite *De Civitate Dei*, he opened it on a well-known page, and with his soul lifted from all petty annoyances, he read, 'A city surpassingly glorious, whether we view it as it now lives by faith in this fleeting course of time, or as it shall dwell in the fixed stability of its eternal seat.'

Lost in holy musing, he did not notice the sound of quick steps on the stairs, and he looked up surprised when Grace entered the study.

'A letter, father,' she said, with a little catch in her breath.

Mr. Unwin took the letter, glanced at the writing — which was that of the learned President of Matt's College — and broke the seal.

Grace stood by, trembling. Why did the President write? Was Matt ill? Watching her father's face, she saw interest change to blank amazement, and amazement to trouble.

'What is it, father?' she whispered.

'I do not understand it at all,' said Mr. Unwin, in a very puzzled way. 'The Presi-

dent writes to know why Matt has not returned to College.'

'Not returned to College!' echoed Grace faintly.

'No. He has not been seen nor heard of since his departure for his holiday. The President naturally supposes him to be here. When did he write to you last?'

'When he had been at Richmond three days. O what can have happened to him?'

'I must go at once to Richmond and find out. His relations will surely know something of him. Happily it is Saturday, so there are no boys to be thought of. Mr. Plowden will give me a lift into Dulford, where I can find a preacher for to-morrow, and go on by the afternoon coach.'

The minister spoke in a hurried disjointed way, which increased Grace's alarm.

'O father!' she cried, 'what can be the matter?'

'I am quite as puzzled as you, my child,' he said, 'and because I am so puzzled, I wish to lose no time in setting off.'

Now the setting off could not, of course, be

accomplished without the concurrence of Mrs. Unwin, and had the occasion been an ordinary one, the minister would have broached the necessity of this sudden journey in his most tactful way; but he was moved beyond caring about any creature's opposition, and told his purpose so resolutely as to frighten away all his wife's objections. The good woman therefore eased her pent-up feelings by pouring forth her fears for Matt.

'O dear! if he should be drowned!' she cried, the ready tears welling to her eyes. 'He said something about going on the river with his cousins; and what does he know of rowing? He never went on the Ullen; I would not hear of such a thing. A boat is so easily upset, and even when people can swim they generally swim to the bottom.'

Grace shivered, and turned a distressful glance upon her mother, while the minister, leaving his wife's dismal auguries and his daughter's pathetic looks, hurried off in search of Mr. Plowden.

CHAPTER XX

MATT'S CHOICE

GRACE had lately been finding how hope deferred makes the heart sick : she proved, during the two days of her father's absence, that dread deferred makes it yet more sick. No reality, however evil, she concluded, could be worse than her fears. Yet, as the Sunday evening wore on, she felt herself to be shrinking from the news it might bring, and tried to turn her thoughts into the current of her mother's talk.

Mrs. Unwin had been greatly pleased and edified by the conversation and the preaching of the good man who had come from Dulford to take the minister's duties. This 'supply,' as she termed him, had not only delivered two 'Gospel sermons' — as mediocre as orthodox — but he had shown a well-bred reticence

in his questions anent Mr. Unwin's absence, accepting the simple explanation that he had been called to a friend in trouble, and gliding into pious platitudes which pleased Mrs. Unwin's ears, if they did not greatly affect her heart.

'I was so afraid,' she said now to Grace, 'that your father would have been obliged to send one of Garrett's young men; and though I wouldn't say a word against anybody preaching that thinks he's got a call, even if he is a draper's assistant, I'd rather listen to a real minister.'

Garrett's was, as you doubtless gather, dear reader, a drapery establishment. It was, in fact, the largest in Dulford, and as, at the date of our story, there appeared to be some mysterious connection, not merely between drapery and Dissent, but between drapers' assistants and preaching, you can easily imagine how ready were Garrett's young men to fill the vacant pulpits of neighbouring chapels.

Grace was about to agree with her mother when she heard the noise of a comer at the

hall door. Her father had returned. She half rose, then sank down again, and sat as if paralysed, while he, with weary steps, entered the parlour. She did not look at him, yet she was conscious of his air of dejection. She tried to speak, but the words died in her throat, and it was her mother that asked —

‘Is he alive?’

‘Yes; he is alive and well,’ returned the minister, in a faint voice. ‘No harm has come to his body.’

‘No harm!’ cried Grace, starting to her feet in wonderful gladness. ‘No harm! O father — then why are you so sad?’

‘Because a great evil has befallen his soul. He has forsaken his calling, and has chosen to become an actor.’

‘An actor!’ echoed Mrs. Unwin.

‘An actor!’ re-echoed Grace.

‘Yes; it is only too true,’ said the minister, heavily. ‘It seems that Edmund Kean, the man he saw play in Dulford last year, now lives at Richmond. Our poor lad met with him — indeed he went out with him on the

river several times. The result is — what I have said.'

'What a wicked man this Edmund Kean must be!' cried Mrs. Unwin vehemently, 'to persuade a godly young man like Matt to such a sinful thing.'

'Matt said that Kean had rather dissuaded him from, than persuaded him to this course,' returned the minister; 'but the unhappy lad is as one possessed — he would listen neither to his uncle, who set before him the worldly disadvantages of an actor's life, nor to me, although I told him plainly that he was casting away his present and eternal happiness.'

'And did he say nothing of me?' cried Grace, as, faint and sick, she put her hand on her father's arm.

'Yes, my child,' replied the minister tenderly. 'He said that his love for you was unchanged, and he asked to be allowed to write to you. I gave him permission to do so, knowing that you would not suffer an earthly affection to displace the heavenly one.'

The knowledge that Matt still loved her —

had asked to write to her — changed Grace's horror to softness, and, turning away, she wept.

‘Then I suppose Matt has been at Richmond all this time,’ said Mrs. Unwin. ‘He might have written, and spared us such a fright and you such a journey.’

‘Yes; he is still with his uncle, who was much grieved for the alarm we had undergone; but in truth, Matt was ashamed to write. Poor misguided lad — we must pray for him; it is all we can do.’

The minister's voice faltered, and he forbore further speech. He was indeed suffering far more cruelly than appeared; for Matt was as the apple of his eye, and he verily believed him to be, at the present moment, in danger of utter damnation. Lifting up his heart in silent intercession, he pleaded with the All-Merciful for the erring one.

During the days which followed the minister's home-coming Grace looked anxiously for the promised letter. It would surely bring her some comfort. At length it arrived, and ran thus—

‘ You know now why I was so long silent, and are no doubt grieved at the cause. Perhaps you think me very wicked. I shall not attempt to justify myself further than by saying that, to have become a minister when I was set on being an actor, would have been the worse sort of wickedness — hypocrisy. Dear little Grace, remember me as kindly as you can ; I shall never cease to think of you, and shall never love another woman. How I wish I could see you ! I would make you forgive me then ; but I must wait for that happiness ; it will come some day. — Your ever faithful
MATT.’

If he had lost religion he had evidently not lost love. However Grace might rue the shipwreck of the one, she could not but rejoice over the preservation of the other ; and therein she felt was hope. Matt would — must — repent of his sin ; then love would point him home to them ; and whenever or however he came, he would find a welcome. Through her mother’s laments, her neighbours’ animadversions, her father’s sadness, her own regret, she was up-

borne by the certainty of the backslider's ultimate return. And indeed she had need of such upbearing, for spring merged into summer, summer changed to autumn, autumn gave place to winter, and no further word did his Aldbourne friends hear of Matt.

CHAPTER XXI

GRACE TAKES A JOURNEY

As the year dragged itself wearily on, Grace sometimes felt that life was becoming to her what many good books said it was — a ‘vale of tears’; but the youth in her struggled against so dismal a conviction, and would not suffer hope to degenerate into resignation. During this period of waiting she took more to heart the beauty everywhere around her than she had hitherto done, and in it found a certain pleasure. Involuntarily she constructed a heaven of her own, a heaven of quite a different type from her mother’s. It was not drawn from Aldbourne chapel, but from the surroundings thereof. It had the same soft charm, the same tender grace, the same sense of home. Hills and valleys alternated in it, woods and fields. A great river

ran through it, wider, grander, but hardly more beautiful than the Ullen. 'The river of God is full of water,' murmured the girl, as she gazed at the brimming stream that served her as a pattern of the 'river of water of life.'

Thus, while she mused, now on the love which seemed so far off, now on the heaven which seemed so near, Christmas came, and brought her a parcel from Matt. How eagerly she opened it and searched for a letter; in vain, however; there was no letter; only a warm gray shawl. With a chill sense of disappointment she took up the shawl, but when she wrapped it around her it might almost have been the embrace of her lover, it warmed her body and soul. Through the cold winter days it was to her the sign of a still enduring love, sacred therefore, and every time she put it on she kissed it, as the priest kisses the holy vestment ere he dons it.

Matt's gift, so comfortable during the frosts of January, was no less comfortable during the winds of March, which blew this year with their accustomed keenness. One day, towards the end of that treacherous month of bright

sun and bitter blasts, Grace, enveloped in her shawl, went to see an old rheumatic cottager who occasionally hobbled to chapel. Lately she had taken to visiting the poorer members of her father's flock, especially such as were sick or sorry, for her own trouble had sweetened her nature instead of turning it sour, and she had grown very pitiful over the troubles of others. To-day, indeed, she acted as the representative of the minister, who, with his wife, had been called away to the sick-bed of their daughter Martha; but none the less was her heart in her work.

She was sitting opposite the old man, listening patiently to a description of his pains past and present, when a sharp tap came at the door, and Dr. Beauchamp entered the cottage. Grace thereupon modestly rose to depart.

'What? what?' cried the parson, with a deprecating gesture. 'It shall never be said that I drove a lady away. Sit down, Miss Unwin; sit down. I have only just popped in to see if our good man here is in want of anything out of my kitchen. There's a pot of

soup, my housekeeper tells me, that can't be emptied, try as the old folks may. What do you say to a basinful, gaffer ?'

'Why, sir,' replied the man, with a very decided smack of his lips, 'the Rectory soup's like marrer in your old bones ; it makes 'em all lissom agen. I can allus feel it a-goin' down the spine o' my back.'

'That's a queer way for soup to go,' said the rector ; 'there must be some magic about it. Anyhow, there's magic in this ;' and, convinced that priestly duty was best done in a solid fashion, he slipped a half-crown into the old man's ready hand.

'And now, Miss Unwin, if you are going, I will walk back with you,' he said, turning courteously to Grace, who again rose quickly.

'What news have you of our friend, Matthew Hare ?' he asked, directly they two were outside the cottage door.

'O sir,' said Grace, tears coming to her eyes at the kind tone of the question, 'we have none.'

'Indeed ! indeed ! Then I know more than you, and I will tell you how. The Carews are

in town, and Tony has written me a long account of their doings. A short time ago, he says, they all went to the Coburg Theatre to see the young actor, Matthew Hare, in *Romeo*. The said actor played so well as to drown the women in tears, and make even a certain gallant officer pipe his eye. Of course this officer must needs go behind the scenes, and congratulate his old acquaintance, who was delighted to see him. And now comes what I particularly wished you to hear. Tony thought our friend looking very pale and haggard. He was home-sick, he said; pining for Aldbourne and the kind faces there. If he could sit for half an hour on Archer's Hill he believed he should be well. But Heaven forbid that he should try that remedy during March. However, Miss Unwin, what I would say is this: do you not feel inclined to forgive him his offence, and to make your father forgive him too? He is leading a most steady life—no cards, no wine, no women.' Here Dr. Beauchamp broke off suddenly. The minister's daughter was probably too unworldly to fear any one of the dread triplet.

‘I have no anger against him,’ cried Grace, ‘neither has my father; but the life he has chosen is a sinful one, and unless—’

‘There are two opinions as to that, young lady,’ interrupted the parson sharply; ‘so look you, don’t worry about the profession the lad has chosen, but just think of him all alone and in poor health, and see what you can do to smooth your father over.’

Grace went home more happy in hearing of Matt than troubled about his health. He was only longing for Aldbourne, he said. O that the longing might dispose him to return to it! Wondering whether he was tired of his strange life, trying to picture that life, determining to write to him, and then judging it best to wait and ask her father’s permission, she passed a good many perturbed hours.

One morning, shortly after her meeting with Dr. Beauchamp, she was busy ironing, and in her anxiety to put a fine gloss on her father’s shirts she had let other anxieties go, when Kezia came to her with the serene vacancy of her face changed to gaping surprise.

‘Here’s Mr. Anthony Carew wants you,

miss,' she said bluntly. 'I've took him into the front parlour.'

'He must have come to see my father; why didn't you tell him that he was not at home?' said Grace, setting down her iron in dismay. The prospect of encountering the magnificent young man all by herself was overwhelming.

'He never asked for the minister,' averred Kezia. 'All he said was, "Is Miss Unwin within, and can I see her?"'

The visit, then, must be intended for her. Stonily she took off her apron, and smoothed down her frock, wondering the while what could bring Mr. Carew hither. Had he some message from Dr. Beauchamp, or had he perhaps come from Matt? With the thought her loitering turned to haste, and forgetting her dread of the visitor, she went quickly to the parlour.

As she entered Mr. Carew came towards her, and immediately she was struck by a difference in his manner. The superb jauntiness had given place to a gentle gravity very becoming in a bold soldier.

'Mine is rather a melancholy errand, Miss Unwin,' he began, in the guarded way most people adopt for the breaking of bad tidings. 'I have come down from town with a message and a note from our friend Matt Hare. The poor fellow is ill, and has set his heart on seeing you and your father.'

'Matt ill?' said Grace, without any perceptible emotion, save that her natural paleness became paler. 'But he is not very ill?'

'I should call him very ill,' returned Mr. Carew, astonished and somewhat annoyed at the calmness with which this little precisian took the news he so feared to tell. 'He has been ailing some time, and about a month ago he caught cold; the cold settled on his lungs, and now he — well, mind you, Miss Unwin, a cold on the lungs is always serious.'

'But Dr. Beauchamp said he was only pining for home; if he could come back to Aldbourne he would be well,' cried Grace piteously. 'I will beg my father to let him come. Perhaps —'

'You don't understand, Miss Unwin,' inter-

rupted her visitor impatiently. 'Matt is far too ill to travel; but you had better read this note. I promised the poor lad to prepare your mind first; but it seems I am a bungler.'

Mr. Carew murmured the last sentence to himself, while Grace with trembling fingers took the note, and read thus —

'DEAR GRACE—I am very ill. The doctors say there is no hope for me. Pray come to me; I long to see you before I die. Your father will come too; neither you nor he can refuse the last request of him who loves you both, and wants your forgiveness. MATT.'

As she read, her knees shook under her, and when she had finished, she sank upon a chair, looking so ghastly pale that for a few moments Mr. Carew thought she was going to faint. But soon she raised her head, and gazing in his face with an expression like that of a wounded dog, gasped, 'No hope!'

'The doctors say so; but they may be wrong—they are oftener wrong than right,' returned Mr. Carew, willing to attempt con-

solation now he found the girl had some feeling in her. 'Matt, for his part, declares that if he could see you, he would get well; so you will come to him at once.'

'O what can I do!' cried Grace, in sad bewilderment. 'My father is away from home, and I don't know when he will return.'

'That is indeed a misfortune,' said Mr. Carew thoughtfully, 'for Matt tells me you have never travelled alone, and have never been to London.'

'It is not only the travelling alone,' said poor Grace, 'but how can I go without my father's consent?'

'You are sure of that,' protested Mr. Carew; 'your father is not a brute. He could not turn against a dying friend.'

'No, O no; but I should like him to say I might go. I will write to him —'

'Good God! you don't know what nonsense you are talking,' cried Mr. Carew vehemently. 'Why, before you could get an answer the poor lad would be dead. Mind you, Miss Unwin' — here the speaker brought his hand down pretty smartly on the

table — ‘Matt has been true to you, though, Heaven knows! a handsome young fellow like that is certain to have all the women in love with him. Why, the night I first saw him play, he was positively beset by them: and when I rallied him on his coldness, he answered, “There is a little girl down at Aldbourne who has all the love I can spare from my calling.” You see, he is crazed about this play business. But since he is so true, I should think you might be a little kind. And now, look here, I will attend you up to London just as if you were my sister. I will show you the same respect and attention as if you were Miss Carew, and no more. Mind you, I am an officer and a gentleman; you may trust me.’

Mr. Carew bore witness to his own character in a superb fashion, and then broke off, expecting an answer to his offer. But Grace, more and more bewildered by the necessity for immediate decision, only murmured, ‘You are very kind.’

Any one who has always trusted to guidance is, if called on to take a step alone,

much in the same plight as the babe when it is first set on its unaided feet. Thus Grace hesitated and feared, while Mr. Carew was lashing himself into a fury.

‘Miss Unwin,’ he said, and therewith he strode up to her, looking capable of carrying her off whether she would or not—‘let me tell you that I promised Matt he should see you, and I mean to keep my promise.’

‘I will go,’ said Grace, and immediately she had spoken, her terror of the strange journey, and of what awaited her at its end, vanished; even the fear of her father’s displeasure was forgotten, and the thought of Matt filled up her mind.

‘There is a good, reasonable girl,’ said Mr. Carew, his anger quickly turning to approval; but, anxious to give her no time to reverse her assent, he continued—‘Can you be ready in a couple of hours? If so, I will call with my gig and drive you into Dulford to catch the afternoon coach.’

‘I will be ready,’ said Grace; but a sudden thought striking her, she cried, ‘O I forgot; I have no money!’

‘Money be damned!’ muttered Mr. Carew under his breath; then with ready and delicate falsehood he said aloud, ‘Matt thought of the money; he gave me some for your journey. I will see to your expenses. Only be ready in time.’

‘I will be ready,’ repeated Grace; and upon Mr. Carew’s departure she went to prepare her slender bundle, trying the while to steady her mind sufficiently for the writing of a letter to her father. But the letter did not please her when written. The reasons for her strange action, which seemed strong indeed to her, did not look so strong on paper. She must leave them, however, as they were, for no time remained. Hurrying on her final preparations, she just managed to be ready as Mr. Carew appeared at the gate.

In a dazed sort of way she got up into the gig, and was driven through the village, never thinking how strange it would appear to the simple Aldbourne folks to see her sitting beside Mr. Carew in his smart vehicle. Just as they were passing by Mr. Masters’s

shop, out came the prudent Rebecca. Catching sight of the pair, she stood transfixed, eyes and mouth wide open. A little farther down the street they overtook Mr. Penny. He, glancing up, started, stared, and finally put on a very knowing smirk.

‘I do believe these fools think I am running away with you,’ said Mr. Carew, with a short laugh, which changed to a sigh as he looked at his companion, who sat stonily silent, indifferent to all remark.

The day was bitterly cold, even for March. The wind was due east, and blew straight in faces set towards Dulford. As it rushed through the valley, it seemed to acquire double keenness, and penetrated Mr. Carew’s thick driving coat and Grace’s warm shawl as if those substantial garments had been mere canvas. To Grace, however, it was only part of the deathly chill ever creeping nearer and nearer her heart; she did not really heed it, nor the clouds of grit it whirled in her face, nor the muttered expletives with which Mr. Carew occasionally met it.

They reached Dulford just in time for the coach, and were lucky enough to secure inside places. The coach then went gaily on through a fair fertile country, and here and there through a pleasant village, or by a gentleman's seat. Mr. Carew would fain have enlivened the way by pointing out everything of interest; but his companion's trouble was evidently too deep to be interfered with. When, therefore, he had shown her all possible attention, he kept silence, though much against his will. Now no sooner was Grace out of Dulford and on an unknown road, than the things which had before been misty grew yet more unreal to her. Surely she was dreaming. The illusion continued when, after travelling some hours, the road began to be crowded with vehicles and bordered by houses: and when at nightfall they went on—on through a labyrinth of streets that seemed without an end, Grace felt convinced that she was in a wild and whirling dream. But when, presently, the coach stopped, and Mr. Carew jumped out, and began to hector the surrounding porters in his own fashion,

the confused girl had a certain sense of reality. Her escort, who had suited himself with a hackney carriage, now came and placed her in it, commanding the coachman not to spare his horse. They went on through more streets, and finally drew up at a gloomy house. As they stepped within it Mr. Carew hurried Grace up a flight of stairs. At the top he opened a door, and there on a sofa, before a blazing fire, lay Matt.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BRINK OF FATE

MATT was probably dozing before his fire, for at the sound of the opening door he stirred and looked up in a sleepy way. Then instantly his face grew radiant —

‘Grace! Dear little Grace! My kind little Grace!’ he cried, holding out his arms.

She sprang to him, and for a few moments forgot his sickness, forgot his sinful life, forgot everything save that his arms were round her once again. But her forgetfulness was soon over. Withdrawing a little from his clasp she looked at him.

‘You are ill,’ she murmured.

‘I have been ill, but I am better. I have lost my cough, and I shall soon get well now you have come,’ he answered smiling;

and she, ready as ever to take her cue from him, smiled back in answering hope.

The very fact of finding Matt on a sofa instead of in bed gave instantaneous relief to Grace's fears. People always went to bed to die; Matt, therefore, could not be so ill as was supposed. Besides, he looked very much better than she had expected him to do; thin he was, certainly, but his eyes were even brighter, his cheeks even redder than of old. Grace's acquaintance with sickness was slight, and though the glitter of Matt's eyes and the brilliancy of his cheeks gave him a touch of unreality in keeping with the phantasmagoria of the whole strange day, these fallacious appearances really deceived the inexperienced girl. No creature, glowing with such beautiful life, could, she thought, be near death.

'I have been longing to see you,' continued Matt, gazing eagerly at her; 'and now I can hardly believe my eyes. But it is really you, my little Grace, only rather pale and scared. Sit here, close to me.' As he spoke he drew her down beside him on the sofa, and went on

—‘Tell me how you managed the journey, you untravelled maid? Were you not cold in this terrible wind?’

‘I suppose it was cold,’ she replied, trying hard to keep back her emotion; ‘but I did not mind it; I had your shawl.’

‘Ah,’ he said, smoothing the shawl with a sort of childish pleasure; ‘I chose the warmest one I could find. But we must take it off now;’ and therewith he leaned forward to unpin the shawl.

The lover’s touch, so different to that of any other, sent a delicious thrill through the girl. How often in her loneliness had she desired it in vain!

‘You dear, good Grace, to come to me,’ murmured Matt. Then, a sudden thought occurring to him, he glanced round the room and said — ‘Did your father bring you?’

‘No, he was not at home,’ said Grace. ‘Mr. Carew brought me. He was very kind.’

The gallant soldier had turned away from sight of that meeting, and was looking with misty eyes at a portrait on the wall of Kean as Richard III.

‘Carew,’ cried Matt, ‘you are indeed a friend.’

In the midst of her bewilderment Grace noticed that Matt spoke to Mr. Carew as to an equal, and she wondered.

‘O come,’ said that gentleman; ‘a journey to Aldbourne and back isn’t anything to make a fuss about, especially when you have the pleasure of a lady’s company half the way. But now, my boy, I have brought you what you wanted, so I’ll leave you to enjoy it. I’ll be back again before bed-time.’

Stretching out his hands, Matt laid them on his friend’s arms, and Grace saw how transparent they were. Then, contrasting the appearance of the two men, she felt a sharp prick of fear.

‘Tony,’ said Matt, looking up in his friend’s face with his irresistible smile, ‘be very careful, for my sake.’

‘You may trust me, my boy,’ returned Mr. Carew, winking his eyes fast to keep back the threatening tears. ‘I wouldn’t vex you again for the world;’ and having pressed the delicate fingers in a hearty grasp he departed.

‘How good that man has been to me,’ said

Matt, leaning back on the sofa with a happy face. 'Ever since I met him a month ago he has proved the truest friend. It is the best heart in the world, and if he were not a toper he would be a fine fellow. He has promised me to keep sober to-night, and he will—he always does if I beg him. So you see, little girl, that even a poor actor may help a weak brother. Ah, Gracie, the world is a surprising place, and down at Aldbourne we knew no more about it than the trout in the Ald know of the great ocean.'

And now that Grace was warmed, Matt would have her fed, so he summoned his landlady, who, like women in general, was ready to do his bidding. The good creature showed such a motherly concern for Matt, and for Grace on Matt's account, as gave the girl a sense of home in this strange land. That she was where she ought to be had appeared certain enough directly she set eyes on Matt. He was here, and ill—then her place was here too. Ay, and she would care not for his body only, but also for the precious soul so grievously endangered by his recent life. She shrank,

indeed, when she thought of venturing upon such a difficult, such a delicate task, yet she trusted that with the occasion her courage would rise.

Presently, as they talked of the cause of Mr. Unwin's absence from home, Matt led up to the great subject by saying —

‘If your father had been at home, I think he would have come to me.’

‘I am sure he would,’ cried Grace. ‘He will come now directly he gets my letter.’

‘I want to see him, and yet — and yet I am afraid of the look in his eyes — the sad look they had at Richmond when I could not be turned from my purpose. I wonder if he thinks I might have avoided fate. He does not believe in free will, so surely he must see that I have been but as a straw in the wind of destiny. None the less guilty, say our divines.’ With these words a shadow came over Matt's countenance, and fixing his eyes on Grace, he asked —

‘What is your opinion, you tender little soul? Do you really think that the Father of all men will punish with everlasting burnings

such of His children as miss a salvation they are powerless to accept ?’

‘I am an ignorant girl,’ said Grace, with fluttering breath and unsteady tongue, ‘but I have been taught that the elect alone can look on God as their Father ; to those who are not called He is a consuming fire.’

‘I don’t ask what you have been taught,’ said Matt earnestly ; ‘I ask what is your honest conviction. Answer me according to your own gentle heart, not according to the tenets of a hard creed.’

‘I am not able to judge in these high matters, I can only accept what I have been taught,’ said Grace, fearful of questioning the doctrine of Election, which, though never put by Mr. Unwin in a very prominent place, lest it should prove a stumbling-block to the diffident, yet underlay all his teaching. Then, seeing Matt’s eyes still expectant, she continued — ‘To our natural mind it does seem impossible that the Father can be anything but pitiful to *all* his children ; but — but —’

‘You have answered,’ interrupted Matt, ‘and I would rather trust to your natural

mind than to the spiritual mind of most theologians. But come now, tell me,' he went on in a voice that began to grow weary, 'does Aldbourne look the same as ever? Does the Ullen flow as full and fair? Do the sunsets redden it, and do the trees gaze at themselves in its water as they used to do? And down below the weir, do the pools shine in the twilight as they did that June evening —' His voice grew fainter, and ceased.

Grace looked at him in sudden terror, but saw at once that he had fallen asleep. As she watched him she noted how rapid and shallow was his breathing, noted, too, the change in him more plainly than at first — the thinness of face and figure, the dark circles round the eyes, the pallid lips. Almost afraid herself to breathe, lest she should disturb what seemed a very light slumber, she watched on, her being divided between anxiety and prayer.

Matt's sleep lasted until the return of Mr. Carew, who, sober as a judge, began to make preparations for the night. It now appeared

that for some time past the soldier had turned nurse, and was accommodated with a shake-down in Matt's room, where the least whisper from his patient could awaken him.

Grace was conducted by the landlady to a tiny chamber aloft, where she lay wide awake all night. With dawn, however, she slept, and at a late hour was roused by the landlady's voice announcing that the gentlemen were already up, and that Mr. Hare was feeling much better.

The good news quickened Grace's movements. In a short time she descended to the parlour, but at the door she stood aghast. There was Matt looking out of an open window!

'O Matt,' she cried. 'An open window!'

'Yes, and a south-west wind coming in,' said Matt, turning to her with quite his old brightness. 'The wind changed last night about three o'clock. I knew it in a moment through all the closed-up windows and curtains. I shall get well now. Your coming and a sou'-wester will set me right again. But come and have breakfast. Carew

has gone out for his. He will drop in again presently.'

The improvement, so visible in Matt's looks, continued all day, drawing from Mr. Carew when he came a pretty compliment to Grace.

'It is all nonsense to talk about the wind,' he said. 'This is your doing, Miss Unwin; see the effect of a lady's presence. It brings not only pleasure, but health. Why on earth do I remain a miserable bachelor?'

So elated was Matt by the genial air that he must needs take Grace out for a drive, just to show her something of London, though to her partial mind the great city was nothing more than the place where Matt lived. When in after days she tried to recall what she had seen, memory showed her only a mirage of streets, churches, people, shifting and unreal as the airy shapes of the desert.

Happily the excursion refreshed more than it wearied the invalid, so that night Grace went to bed and to sleep with hope high in her heart.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RULING PASSION

A COUPLE of days passed, during which Matt still grew better, yet Grace did not find courage to unburden her mind of its load. Once or twice she tried to speak, but somehow the words would not come. To her, who had been so long accustomed to listen in silence, speech might well be difficult. Had Matt divined her thoughts, he would have helped her to express them frankly, but happy in the calm of her presence, he lost sight of the barrier between himself and the pious maiden.

On the afternoon of the third day the manager of the Coburg Theatre came in great excitement to inquire after his actor's health. The substitute he had found for Hare was a miserable devil, whose sentiment made folks laugh instead of weep. *Romeo and Juliet*

was cast for to-night. What a hash the fellow would make of the title part! O that Hare were well enough to play! And really he looked—he seemed, amazingly recovered. Surely he might venture forth. Every possible precaution should, of course, be taken; a carriage should be sent for him, he should have the best and warmest dressing-room, should be carefully guarded from draughts. Moreover, the play should be cut short here and there. The public would willingly put up with certain excisions if they could be gratified by the sight of their favourite Romeo again.

Matt's eyes glistened. With the revival of strength and spirits had come a craving for the boards. The thought of treading them again took hold of him. Yes; he was quite well enough to play. He would take his old part to-night.

The manager went off in high feather, as may be imagined, for Matt Hare, if not equal to many leading parts, made a most acceptable Romeo. His youth, his good looks, his beautiful voice, were so many passports to

public favour; but besides these good gifts, it was very evident that the character of Romeo, so fickle in his loves, so faithful in his love, had been profoundly studied by the young actor. Then, too, while he bated nothing of the lover's passion, he showed a delicacy, a refinement in the expression of it, such as more famous Romeos had sometimes lacked.

While the manager was hugging himself on the success of his errand, Grace, who, upon the announcement of a visitor, had modestly withdrawn to her own room, descended to the parlour and heard of the project for the evening. At first horror made her dumb, but presently she found words.

‘Matt, dear Matt,’ she pleaded, ‘you are not well enough for any excitement, and if you were, you would surely not return to this sinful practice. O Matt!’

‘This sinful practice!’ cried Matt, catching eagerly at the words. ‘How can you tell that it is a sinful practice? You know nothing about the stage, nor does your father. You judge it entirely by what certain bigots

have written. Now, Grace, listen to this — for I have thought the matter out. When Paul was at Athens, the very source of the drama, he said nothing against the stage, but, in the sermon he preached there, actually used, as a sort of text, the words of a Greek play-writer. Neither did he warn the Corinthians to forswear the theatre they loved, but, in his epistle to them, quoted a line taken straight out of a Greek comedy. You must allow, then, that Scripture does not even hint at acting being a sinful practice. But I have not time now to set all my arguments before you ; only trust me, if you could throw away prejudice, you would understand how the stage may have teachers of righteousness as well as the pulpit.’

‘And this *Romeo*,’ said Grace timidly, quite overborne by the rush of words, ‘does it teach righteousness?’

‘Yes, indeed!’ cried Matt, his eyes seeming to emit fire, ‘for it shows a love so constant, so devoted, as to dare all dangers, ay, even death itself. And though we can hardly wish all husbands and wives to be as

passionate as Romeo and Juliet, we may well wish them to be as true. But, really, I must not chatter any more, for I want to run through my part, in case any of it should have slipped out of my head.'

Reluctant to stay, yet more reluctant to go, Grace sat, while Matt rehearsed the part of Romeo, which, first fanciful, then imaginative, then impassioned, lifted the hearer by degrees quite out of herself, until she had no notion where or who she was. She was delighted, dazed, almost terrified. What wonder, indeed, that this exquisite wooing, so far away from anything she had ever heard or read of, this glorious pæan of love, which exalts the senses themselves into soul, should affect the loving-hearted girl?

Seemingly quite regardless of the emotion he was arousing in Grace, Matt went on, sometimes playing to her as if she were Juliet. He had not ended when Mr. Carew came in, and demanded what Matt was ranting about. Upon hearing the rash intent, he burst into vehement deprecation.

'You must either be mad or a damned

fool! You'll kill yourself. You are no more fit to act to-night than you were a week ago.'

'What? not when I feel quite strong, and have got rid of my cough?'

'Got rid of your cough!' cried Mr. Carew, in his desire to prevent the folly, blurting out a cruel truth, 'That is the worst feature in your case. Ask the doctor if it is not, and don't be such an infernal idiot.'

'You seem to forget that there is a lady present,' said Matt, setting his teeth determinedly. 'And what you say about my cough must be a mistake. To get rid of it has been our one aim, the doctor's and mine. Besides, surely I am the best judge of how I feel.'

'You must pardon me, Miss Unwin, for getting into such a rage. It is the Carew temper,' said the soldier, with a fine pride in the family infirmity. 'And really this — this ridiculous design is enough to make any man angry. Mind you, Hare, if you persist in it, I wash my hands of you; so, I have no doubt, will Miss Unwin, and here

am I, ready to accompany her back to Aldbourne whenever she likes.'

'My good friend,' said Matt, laying his hand on the angry man's arm with his irresistible smile, 'you must forgive me if I cannot listen to your arguments. I have promised the manager. A gentleman keeps his promise at all risks. We will not dispute, therefore, especially as I must husband my strength for Romeo. And you will go with me to the theatre.'

Mr. Carew stood irresolute a minute, then turned to Grace, and said —

'I will not take the responsibility alone; I will only go if you go too.'

'I!' said Grace; 'I go to the theatre!'

'No, no,' cried Matt; 'she shall do no such thing. I will not have her put in purgatory for my sake.'

'Well, I remember hearing of a husband who went down into hell after his wife,' said Mr. Carew, with a sudden gleam of school-boy lore; 'so I should think Miss Unwin might go to purgatory for you, particularly as she is only expected to stay a very short

time. At any rate, if she will not go, neither will I. Suppose you were taken ill, and could not be moved. Suppose — But there, I say again, I will not incur the responsibility alone.'

Both men looked at Grace, and in that supreme moment she forgot her horror of the theatre, forgot to ask what would have been her father's decision; thrilled by the love-music she had been hearing, and yet more by Mr. Carew's words, she returned Matt's gaze, and said —

'I will go with you.'

CHAPTER XXIV

ROMEO

PALER, more quiet than was even her wont, Grace sat beside Mr. Carew in a stage box at the Coburg Theatre, her close gray gown and unadorned hair making a striking contrast to the gay dresses and beplumed heads near her. Blind to the finery of her neighbours, and deaf to Mr. Carew's talk, she gazed blankly before her, so possessed by the thought of Matt that the fact of finding herself in a playhouse troubled her not at all. But now the curtain rose, and for the first time in her life Grace looked upon what she had been taught to abhor.

The opening scene, with its constant entry of Montagues and Capulets, its sparring bouts, its crowded stage, gave her only a sense of confusion. Nor did she understand the burst

of applause that welcomed a fresh comer, whose melodious voice, striking with much effect on the commonplace tones of his fellows, said —

Is the day so young?

In truth, Matt made an excellent Romeo. The beautiful face, the noble bearing, the airy manner, which only thinly veiled the ardent soul, admirably realised one's idea of the young Veronese noble. Moreover, to-night there was a strange brilliancy about him, which the manager noted as a good earnest that the young actor might presently aspire to yet finer parts. For some minutes Grace did not recognise, in the strangely-attired gallant with the long golden hair, the man for whose sake she was here, but when she did so, she was filled with shame. He who had been destined to the solemn office of the ministry was exhibiting himself before these people in a fantastic dress, and was talking in dainty phrases about love and women. Presently, when Romeo's rapid change of feeling took place, when he wooed Juliet, above all when, as a

banished man, he bade his wife farewell, Grace's shame changed to disgust, to jealousy. She winced; she went from hot to cold. She was looking on while Matt, not Romeo, made love to another woman. But after a while, in spite of herself, her interest in the story grew so strong as to exclude personal feeling. The Juliet of the night, though not much above the ordinary run of Juliets, was exalted into something like excellence by her lover. Who would not play to such a Romeo! Inspired by him, then, she acted better and better as she proceeded, until, in the scenes of the friar's cell and the drinking of the potion, she showed real power. When Juliet lay as dead, Grace's tears flowed for the heroic wife, whose rivalry with herself she had quite forgotten. At this time Garrick's version of the play held the stage. Therein, as old play-goers tell, Juliet was made to awaken from her trance before her husband expired. Here the Romeo of to-night was always accustomed to make a great impression: he now surpassed himself. His delight at Juliet's recovery triumphed over

the pains caused by the deadly drug he had swallowed. He soothed his wife, concealing his own agony, which became every instant more acute, until delirium took him. Then slowly, slowly his vigour relapsed; he grew weaker, weaker; his voice faded to a whisper; he fell lifeless from Juliet's arms.

On the descent of the curtain the applause was loud and long, but it failed to summon Romeo before the audience. After some delay the manager, looking much disturbed, came forward.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'Mr. Hare is overcome by his exertions. As you know, he is not in good health. You will excuse him to-night.'

'Just as I expected,' muttered Mr. Carew. 'Come, Miss Unwin, we will go round to him;' and with Grace clinging to his arm he found his way behind the scenes.

They were met by the manager, who seized Mr. Carew's other arm, saying in a low voice —

'I am glad you are here. He is in a dead faint. We can't revive him. I have sent for a doctor.'

‘Where is he?’ asked Mr. Carew hoarsely.

‘On the stage; we haven’t moved him.’

They hurried on the stage. There lay Romeo, just as when he fell from his wife’s embrace. How beautiful — how ghastly pale!

‘Give him air,’ cried the manager to the actors, who, still in stage dress, crowded around with smelling-salts, brandy, and other restoratives.

They drew back, while Grace, in an agony of fear, glided on, and knelt beside the fainting Matt.

‘The doctor is here,’ whispered the manager to Mr. Carew. Ah! why did he hush his voice so?

The doctor came; bent over the prostrate man; felt his pulse; laid a hand upon his heart; then, rising horror-struck, murmured, ‘He is dead.’

CHAPTER XXV

CONCLUSION

HOWEVER hearts may ache, the sun shines, the birds sing, the earth renews her youth ; and to Aldbourne came the full beauty of spring and of summer, notwithstanding the grief that had befallen the minister's family. To Grace, sunshine, the song of birds, and all the pleasant sights and sounds within a stone's throw of her dwelling, were hateful mockeries, seeming as they did to be symbols of a loving power, when in fact that power was hard, cruel, implacable. For from the time when she, recovering from a long, long swoon, found herself in Matt's lodgings, one terror had possessed her — Matt had died in sin. What, then, must be his fate? Only when she entered the darkened chamber, and saw the beautiful face of the dead, with the lofty smile, the unutterable calm upon it,

did the terror leave her. Looking at the fair tenement of clay, so lately informed by a fairer soul, it was impossible to suppose that soul in torment. But the funeral came; they took him from her; and she, with her father, who had arrived in town the morning after Matt's death, returned to Aldbourne.

She let her friends do what they would with her; she ate; she drank; sometimes she smiled, but it was a smile to wring your heart. And all the while the awful fear was gnawing within. She tried to pray, but failed utterly; and, after all, of what use was prayer? The being she held dearer than her own soul had, to her belief, gone out of the reach of any aid. She might make her life one long intercession, it could avail him nothing. And if he were lost, what was salvation to her? A state so unnatural to a pious, reverent nature could not last. She fell ill, and in bodily pain found some relief from mental pangs. She tried to tell all her trouble to her father, but he, poor man, involuntarily shrank from the mention of a sorrow that he could not comfort. There was no touch of Antinomianism in his creed,

or he might have stayed himself on the belief that Matt, having certainly once been of the elect, though he had fallen from grace, could not be finally lost. But the minister, dealing honestly with facts, feared that the lad had never been truly called, and his dying in open sin bereft those that loved him of all assurance of his salvation. Still, there were what theologians called the uncovenanted mercies of God; to these the tender affectionate man must leave the dear soul; but not without a yearning like St. Paul's when he cried—'I could wish myself accursed from Christ for my brethren's sake.'

It never struck him how much wider was his own heart than he imagined the heart of God to be, nor did he question the conclusions of those theologians who have encompassed the Divine with the strait bonds of human logic, and supposed the Creator circumscribed by the limits of the creature.

One evening, when Grace was growing wearily better, she sat at the window of her bedroom, watching the stars come out in the summer sky, and as she watched she thought

of the great company of souls departed this life, some assuredly to shine as stars, others reserved for the blackness of darkness. With a sudden enlargement of heart she comprehended how numberless other dear souls, besides the one she loved, must have been and were still wondered about, mourned over. Hers was not the only heart sick with fear of a lost friend's probable fate. Sinking on her knees, the first time for a long while, she prayed.

Presently she rose, and again looked out of doors. The night, though moonless, was light, the stars shone kindly down, the trees bordering the garden stood dark against the pale sky, whispering softly in a little western breeze. The hay in the Rectory paddock had been cut, and the scent of it came in at the open window. Mercy seemed to be over all the works of God—and meanwhile souls were lost, lost for ever. Grace's brain reeled. A tempest was in her weak womanish mind, when suddenly, as if from the presence of the Eternal Himself, flashed through her the question —

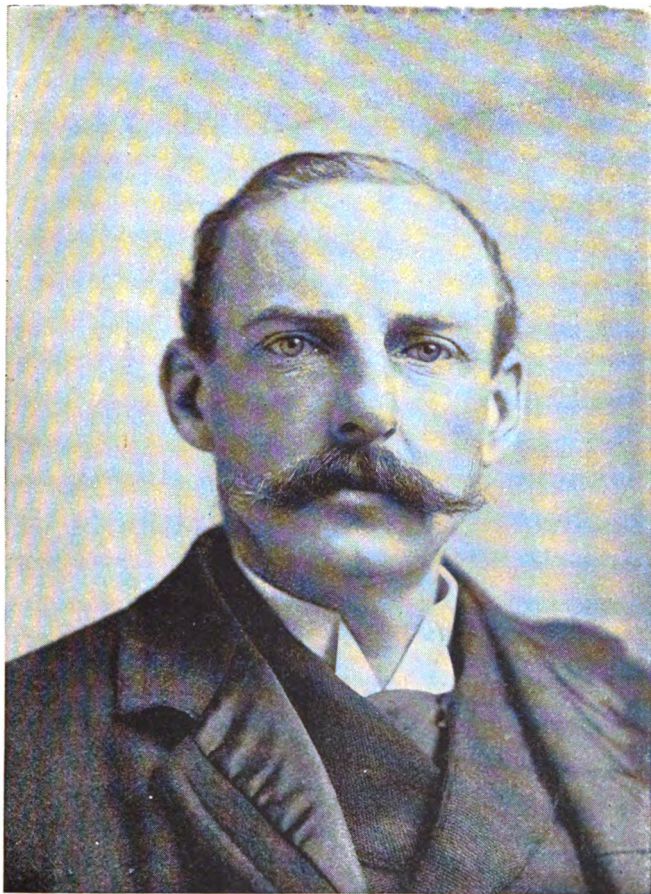
‘ Art thou, poor little soul, more merciful than God, the very source of mercy ? ’

She fell on her knees, as if listening indeed to a divine voice; and as she knelt, all doubt, all fear passed from her. She burst into a flood of happy tears that washed away the bitterness of the past. Yes, she might well trust the soul she loved to the mercy that made it. It and all souls must be safe in such keeping. When she lay down, her sleep was full of peace, and so also was her awakening.

Had you known Grace Unwin in after years, you would probably have thought her a quiet and somewhat precise woman, a good housewife, a devoted daughter; but that she had known passion, had been defrauded by death, had fought a way to peace out of the bonds of a strait creed, you would not have dreamed. Yet such women are many; we touch their hands, we look in their calm faces, and do not know how, in the great mysteries of love and of death, they are wiser than we.

THE END.

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